The Internet in Egyptian Society and Its Use as a News Medium

by

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Abstract

The Internet news medium has immense potential to restructure the existing media regime in Egypt. Online news sites offer new patterns for the production and consumption of media content and function as communication spaces in realms which lie beyond existing social and political constraints. This dissertation begins with an analysis of the social construction of the Internet in Egypt. It endeavours to show how certain political, economic and cultural interests and the agendas of key social actors are shaping the development of the Internet in Egypt. It also describes how institutional arrangements, the regulatory system and the communications culture are mediating the implementation and uses of the Internet. Following this analysis, the dissertation explores the nature of the Internet news medium, its communication architecture and its unique capabilities. Case studies of two Egyptian news organizations and their online news production processes are presented in order to develop an understanding of journalists' conceptions of the new medium, their work practices and the online gate-keeping processes. These case studies highlight different methods for constructing online audiences and different ways to approach the online news medium. Online news text and its structural and stylistic features are then analysed. Finally, the impact of the Internet on the mass media regime is assessed, paying particular attention to issues of access and participation, censorship and freedom of expression. The dissertation closes by considering the implications of the online medium for the emerging civil society in Egypt. The online medium permits new actors to participate freely in public debate, and could thus present a serious challenge to the dominance of the state in the public domain.

Résumé

La presse électronique diffusée par internet possède la capacité de provoquer d'importants changements dans la situation des médias d'un pays tel que l'Égypte. Les sites d'information sur internet offrent la possibilité de nouveaux modes de production et de consommation des produits médiatiques, et fonctionnent en élargissant l'espace de la communication au-delà des limites sociales et politiques établies. Cette thèse présente en premier lieu une analyse de la construction sociale du réseau internet en Égypte. Elle montre comment certains intérêts politiques, économiques et culturels, ainsi que les lignes d'action des acteurs sociaux clefs, ont marqué son développement. Elle décrit également comment l'établissement et les usages de cette technologie ont été façonnés par des mesures institutionnelles, par des systèmes réglementaires et par une culture communicationnelle. À la suite de cette analyse, la recherche explore la nature de ce nouveau média que constitue la presse électronique diffusée par internet, son architecture de communication et son potentiel spécifique. Une étude de cas de deux entreprises de presse égyptiennes et de leurs productions diffusées par internet permet de déterminer quelles sont les conceptions éditoriales qui fondent ces nouveau média, quelles sont les procédures et pratiques de travail qu'ils adoptent, ainsi que leurs processus de sélection de l'information. Ces cas révèlent en outre l'existence de différents modèles de construction des audiences et différents paradigmes qui sous-tendent la presse électronique diffusée par internet. L'analyse du contenu des nouvelles et de leur forme est présentée par la suite. Enfin, une estimation de l'impact de cette nouvelle presse sur les média de masse traditionnels est présentée, particulièrement en rapport avec les enjeux de l'accès, de la participation, de la censure et de la liberté d'expression. Un examen des incidences du média électronique sur la société civile émergente en Égypte met l'accent sur la façon dont ce média permet à de nouveaux acteurs de participer librement au débat public et ainsi de constituer un sérieux défi pour la domination de l'État dans le domaine public.

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Chapter 1

Introduction _____

The Internet is a communication medium with its own logic and its own language. But it is not confined to any one particular form of cultural expression. It cuts across all of them. Furthermore, "its communication is usually embedded in social practice.... The kind of communication that thrives on the Internet is that related to free expression in all its forms.... It is open source, free posting, decentralized broadcasting, interaction, purpose-oriented communication, and shared creation that find their expression on the Internet" (Castells, 2001, p.200). As such, the Internet has immense potential to restructure existing communication systems, offering new possibilities for management and delivery of information and for interaction among individuals and groups. It extends communication spaces into realms which lie beyond existing social, political and physical constraints.

In centralized communication regimes, where media outlets are controlled and closely monitored by the political elite, the advent of the Internet presents a real challenge. It provides a gateway to an expanding universe of news and information sources created outside the control of the political elite; and it thins out the communication hierarchies of traditional media. In so doing, the Internet allows users to interact with a vast array of "alternative" news sources that do not necessarily reflect the

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government's official construction of reality. More than just a new technology within the communication matrix, the Internet disrupts the established media order in centralized systems, and therefore provokes complicated social and political responses. It is through the prism of the disruption of the media regime that this dissertation will examine the incorporation of the Internet news medium into the social communication system in Egypt. However, before examining the changes in the Egyptian communication system, one must first understand the Internet as a technological advance and consider its use as a communication medium.

Although the recent popularity of the Internet has attracted the attention of a vast body of researchers, ranging from philosophers to technocrats, the communication architecture of the Internet and its capabilities and constraints are not well understood. Moreover, the hype surrounding the online medium—heralding it as a "communication revolution" and predicting its sweeping impact on every aspect of social life—further confuses the nature of the Internet and its actual capabilities. Much of the Internet's rhetoric is cast in simple deterministic terms, which portray the Internet as the engine of inexorable social change. The Internet is optimistically depicted as having the capacity to "reorder every domain in social and personal life, transforming work and knowledge forms, health and science, domestic life and entertainment, national economies and international relations, democracy and the distribution of power" (Berland, 2000, p. 235). It is thus identified with the birth of a new human society. In a similar vein, it is suggested that computer-mediated communication (CMC) will create new egalitarian social formations that will challenge the existing social and political hierarchy, lessen feelings

of powerlessness, and "revitalize citizen-based democracy" (Rheingold, 1993, p. 14). Cyberspace will establish "new forms and expressions of governance: a paradigmatic change in the constellation of power between individuals, governments and social institutions" (Loader, 1997, p. 7)

On the other hand, dystopian interpretations of the Internet's impact are no less prevalent. Unlike the information-rich, democratic, and user-controlled universe envisioned in the utopian views, many critics associate cyberspace with serious social and economic concerns. Communication theorist Neil Postman, one of the most vocal critics of new communication technologies, asserts that what is envisioned as an information-rich milieu is in fact "information chaos" that will lead to the breakdown of a coherent cultural narrative (1992, p. 60). Other critics emphasize the potential of the Internet to "erode community and empty day-to-day life, by allowing individuals and organizations to enter into virtual time-space which is seen as competing with reality and which clouds whatever they do with a sense of inauthenicity" (Slevin, 2000, pp. 49-50). Still others fear the Internet is having a negative effect on the fabric of society as people become more dispersed and fragmented, more isolated and powerless. The Internet, thus, exacerbates human misery as further removing people from their natural world and negatively altering the practices and spaces of communication that had previously nurtured democracy (Howcroft & Fitzgerald, 1998, p.53). Concerns about threats to privacy, corporate hegemony, and the spreading of subversive content on the Internet also represent a significant thread in dystopian accounts (Fisher & Wright, 2001).

These polarized visions are not, of course, unique to the Internet. As James Carey (1988) notes, every new communications technology has stimulated extreme speculations; "satanic and angelic images that have surrounded, justified, and denigrated" technology without realistically assessing its actual capabilities and limitations (Carey, 1988, p. 2). Rhetoric about revolutions and ruptures is fundamentally flawed, insofar as it is founded on a predominantly technologically deterministic view, which takes for granted the agency of technology and assumes that the technology provides an effective and reliable vehicle for social change (McCormack, 1994). According to Wiebe Bijker (1995), technological determinism "comprises two ideas: technological development is autonomous, and societal development is determined by technology" (1995, p. 238). This perspective thus assumes that technology implies a known direction, determined solely by the capabilities of the technology. As an exogenous and autonomous development, technology coerces and determines organizational arrangements, social relations, and economic and political structures.

Such conceptualizations of a direct causal relationship between technology and social change obscure the social and cultural processes that are implicated in the invention, development and diffusion of technology. Technological determinism further fails to acknowledge the complexities of the constant, mutual interaction between society and technology. Commenting on new communication technologies, Silverstone (1999) writes that,

> Technology does not come upon us without human intervention. Once one acknowledges that it emerges from complex processes of design and development that themselves are embedded in the activities of institutions and individuals constrained and enabled by society and history. New

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media are constructed on the foundations of the old. They do not emerge fully fledged or perfectly formed. Nor is it ever clear how they will be institutionalized or used or even less, what consequences they will have on social, economic or political life. The certainties of a techno-logic, the certainties of cumulative development... do not produce their equivalent in the realms of experience (1999, p. 20).

The technological determinism perspective, Silverstone argues, misses "the nuances of agency and meaning, of the human exercise of power and of resistance. It misses, too, other factors that affect the creation of technologies themselves and factors that mediate our response to them. Society, economy, politics, culture." Technologies, he continues, are "enabling (and disabling) rather than determining" (1999, p. 21).

This critique of technological determinism, however, should not be taken to mean that technology produces no consequences. It certainly does. As Silverstone notes,

Such consequences can be, and certainly have been, profound: changing, both visibly and invisibly, the world in which we live. Writing and printing, telegraphy, radio, telephony and television, the Internet, each have offered new ways of managing information, and new ways of communicating it; new ways of articulating desire and new ways to influence and to please. New ways, indeed, to make and transmit and to fix meaning (1999, p. 20).

To better understand the social implication of Internet technology, a more complex approach which analyzes what Bijker (1995) calls "sociotechnical ensembles" is thus needed. Such an approach views technology and society as "intimately interconnected, heterogeneous ensemble of technical, social, political, and economic elements" (1995, p. 249).

Social processes and culture interact with material technologies and, in so doing, alter the conditions under which technologies are used, diffused and acquire meaning. Although, ultimately, the consequences of technology will be dependent on social processes, technologies themselves are never neutral. Technologies present the social world with new "liberties of

action"… making it physically possible to engage in new actions, to build new things. The material possibilities presented by technologies of communication are characterized by a bias… that creates the grounds for, but not inevitability of, social organization (Harrison & Falvey, 2001, p. 5).

It is through a social constructivist approach that this dissertation will account for the development of Internet technology in Egyptian society. This approach will focus on the "reinvention" of Internet technology in the Egyptian context of use. It thus goes beyond the simplistic extrapolation of social consequences from the technology itself (what the technological determinism approach offers); it, moreover, is not limited to an analysis of the socio-cultural elements that shape the technology only in its design and early development stages (what some models of the social shaping of technology present). Pablo Boczkowski (1999) stresses the importance of the social constructivist approach in studying "technology-in-use," stating that,

> Often, scholars have espoused a relatively unilateral causal view. They have focused either on the social consequences of technological change or, most recently, on the social shaping of technological systems. Whereas the former have usually centered upon how technologies impact upon users' lives, the latter have tended to emphasize how designers embed social features in the artifacts they build. In this sense, the process of inquiry has fixed either the technological or the social, thus turning it into an explanans rarely problematized. However, what the study of technology-in-use has ultimately shown is that technological and social elements recursively influence each other, thus becoming explanans (the circumstances that are believed to explain the event or pattern) and explanandum (the event or pattern to be explained) at different periods in the unfolding of their relationships (1999, p. 92).

Through this approach, I hope I will be able to show how the Internet is developed and reproduced in Egypt. As Castells (2001) comments, "It is a proven lesson from the history of technology that users are key producers of the technology, by adapting it to their uses and values, and ultimately transforming the technology itself" (2001, p.28).

A second part of this dissertation will focus, as I have mentioned, on the use of the Internet as a news medium within the context of the Egyptian communications system. As a global network of networks that enables computers of all kinds to directly communicate and share services throughout much of the world, the Internet offers a wide range of information, transactions and communication spaces. Its decentralized structure provides users with the ability to receive, create and send information, and to communicate in many forms, including electronic mail, Usenet news groups, listserv mailing lists, simulation spaces, and World Wide Web sites. The use of the Internet as a communication system exploded in the closing years of the last century. At the end of 1995, the first year of widespread use of the World Wide Web, there were about 16 million users of computer communication networks in the world. In September 2002, there were over 600 million (NUA Internet Surveys, 2002). The increasing popularity of the Internet has encouraged media companies to carve out niches in the new medium. Many newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations, and news wire services have established online sites in which they provide full or partial versions of their conventional news, and/or develop content that is designed specifically for the online environment. As of February 2002, the database of U.S-based Editor & Publisher Interactive contained 12,967 news sites established by conventional news media worldwide (5,000 newspapers, 4,065 magazines, 2,233 radio stations, 1,429 television stations, and 240 wired news services).

In parallel, the number of users who adopt the Internet as a news source has increased. In the United States, for instance, the Pew Research Center's surveys indicate

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that the number of people who go online to access news has grown substantially since 1996. According to the June 2000 survey, "one-in-three Americans (33%) now regularly [get] news online, up from just 20% two years ago. This represents a solid majority of all Internet users (61%) who go online for news at least once a week, including 27% of users who get news online every day" (Pew Research Center, 2000). This important status of the Internet as a news medium is also confirmed by other user surveys in the United States. According to an *MSNBC Online* survey, the Internet was in a statistical dead heat with cable TV and Radio in terms of reliance on it as a news medium; and it is used slightly more often than magazines for the acquisition of information (Wicks. 2001, p. 165).

In Egypt, Internet services were launched in October 1993 through a linkage established between the Egyptian Universities Network and the European Academic and Research Network. However, it was only in 1997 that the Internet entered into a relatively wide use. Among the first users of this new technology were the newspapers, which launched web sites in order to extend their news services to the online medium and promote their images. The year of 1997 witnessed the emergence of online sites of three newspapers; the number increased in 1998 to nine. At present, more than thirty-five newspapers and magazines have their own news sites. Beyond the number of the online sites of print media, with the spread of the Internet, a growing number of Egyptians began to embrace this new medium as a significant source for news. According to a survey conducted in Egypt in 2000, news is one of the most commonly sought items on the Internet: 63% of users access different online news sources frequently, while only 12% of

users have never accessed any news online (El-Nawawy, 2000). Similarly, in her study of patterns and motives for Internet use among Egyptian Youth, Abd El-Salam (1998) found that 72.5% of respondents use the Internet to get information and news (1998, p. 105). Sami Taye (2000) shows that the Internet is an important medium of news and information for the vast majority of the Egyptian and Arab youth he surveyed (91.5%); Taye also found that Egyptians are more concerned with getting hard news online, whereas the surveyed individuals from the Arab Gulf countries are more interested in soft news (2000, pp. 63-64). When extraordinary events occur, Hiba Shaheen (2002) argues, Egyptians show a greater interest in getting news from satellite television networks and the Internet. During the U.S. war on Afghanistan, Shaheen reports, Internet users showed a higher degree of interest in accessing various news sites to get news about the war and in participating in online opinion polls available in these sites (Shaheen, 2002).

The rising importance of the Internet as a news medium marks new changes in the media landscape. Not only does it reflect the new and significant position of the online medium, but it also undermines the privileged position of traditional media as news-providing services. Despite its growing importance, the nature of the Internet news medium, its structural differences from the print and broadcast media, and the challenges it poses to the traditional media are not well understood. To comprehend the online news medium, we must look at this new technology as a "system" that, according to Ursula Franklin (1992), consists of three components. The first component of this system is the machine or artifact that enables new forms of communication and presents new communicative capabilities. The second important systemic component is what Franklin

calls "formalized practices." Formal work practices, which are developed in order to use this new artifact, link technology to culture. The third component of the technological "system" consists of what Franklin calls "specialized knowledges," which are acquired by those who develop and operate the new technology. Franklin asserts that the institutionalization of all new technologies involves new forms of "organization, procedures, symbols, new words, equations and, most of all, a [new] mindset" (1992, p. 12).

Along these definitional lines, this dissertation will focus first on the artifact—the Internet news medium as a communication device, which has distinctive capabilities and unique structure. In this respect, Bolter and Grusin's theory of "remediation"—namely, that new communication technologies grow out of old media through complex processes of "repurposing" and "incorporation"—provides a useful framework to understand the Internet news medium. The different ways in which the online news medium remediates the print and broadcast media, the various strategies to rival or refashion these old media, and the twin logics of representation ("immediacy" and "hypermediacy") which are used to introduce the Internet as an improved version of the traditional media—these are all factors that will determine the specificity of this new medium, while, at the same time, offering a means for reinterpreting the work of earlier media. Since no medium can now function independently and establish its own separate and purified space of cultural meaning, conceiving of remediation as a way of reforming or improving upon earlier media is a constructive framework for defining the capacities and limitations of the Internet news medium. Following Franklin (1992) the thesis will also investigate the

communication activities and work practices of online news producers, as well as their specialized knowledge, to explain the uniqueness of the Internet news medium. These components will be the focus of chapter three, which compares two important news organizations in Egypt, *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd*, as well as the perceptions, values and practices of their online news producers.

Chapter four will clarify the nature of the Internet news medium, its content and format. Of particular significance is an analysis of the ways in which the structural differences of the Internet medium shape online text. Rather than merely examining the content as a finished and fixed product, it is important to analyze how the technological features of the Internet construct a dynamic content that alters the communicative experience of the reader. This content is produced in a particular organizational context as Ettema, Whitney, and Wackman (1997) point out. They note, "Mass-mediated symbol systems... are, at one level of analysis, the work of individual or small groups of media professionals. At another level of analysis, however, they are the product of complex organizations; at still another, higher level they reflect the economic arrangements of media industries and institutions" (1997, p. 33). By analyzing the online gate-keeping process (which involves not just news selection, but all aspects of news handling and control) on the individual, organizational and cultural levels, significant differences between the online news products of *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd* can be explained.

Chapter five will investigate the online news medium and its impact on the social communication system in Egypt. When one considers the nature of the social communication system in Egypt, it becomes immediately clear that the Internet holds

great potential to bring about dramatic change. In Egypt, the communication system is highly centralized, characterized by governmental ownership of the largest outlets of the print media. All national newspapers and magazines that have enough power to set the public agenda are under direct government control. Although there are many party and independent newspapers, they suffer from various kinds of economic and political restrictions, which limit their circulation and lessen their impact on the Egyptian public. Broadcast media are not arms-length "public service" organization as in Europe and Canada; rather, they come under the direct supervision of the Minister of Communication. Furthermore, all foreign publications that circulate in the Egyptian market are under direct censorship. This system ensures the complete hegemony of the government media and their monopoly on the public mind. According to a survey by Nader Fergany (1995), "at least five out of six respondents have no information outlet that does not reflect the official 'world vision'" (1995, p. 7).

The incorporation of the Internet into the Egyptian media landscape offers new prospects for change. Issues of access and participation, censorship and freedom of expression are all impacted by the spread of the Internet news medium. The fact that the Internet is a medium which does not lend itself to censorship (there is no law specifically regulating online speech in Egypt), that the numerous online information and news sources are available to all users; as well as the openness of the Internet's architecture, which involves users in the creation of online text—all of these capabilities will be shown to engender significant change in Egypt's public communications structure. As such, the Internet provides a powerful context, through which individuals may reinterpret and

counter the agenda-setting and meaning-making influences of the official media. As well, new opportunities are created for social and political debates. Drawing on Habermas' concept of the public sphere, this dissertation will argue that the Internet creates a new, liberalized public space which is becoming an important locus for debating democracy, identity and human rights issues in Egyptian society.

Literature Review

The Internet has occupied a prominent space in academic discourse since the early 1990s. Aiming to make more sense of the Internet, an increasing number of researchers have explored the development, uses and consequences of the Internet across all types of social, cultural, and institutional settings. This growing body of literature can be organized broadly under the two headings of: Internet use in society and Internet use in organizations and by individuals and groups.

The Internet and Society

At the societal level, many researchers focus on the general social impact of the Internet on the "information society" and the "postindustrial" economy. They argue that the information dissemination capabilities of the Internet influence all technological, economic, occupational, spatial and cultural aspects of the contemporary information society (e.g. Murthy, 2000). Other researchers explore the role of the Internet in promoting sustainable and equitable development in less-developed countries. A group of these studies argue that the Internet can become a tool for social development only if it

is applied in a way that addresses the complex challenges of improving the lives of the least-privileged groups in developing countries (e.g. Uimonen, 1997). Another body of research deals with issues of Internet access and equity across societies as well as within them. These studies raise concerns about the digital divide and the disparity in Internet access which exist between developing and developed countries (Afullo, 2000). Initially, the term "access" was defined solely as technical access (access to computer and telecommunication services). Many studies now deploy a more complex definition of access to encompass social access (access to education, professional knowledge and online content). A variety of socio-demographic characteristics are also recognized as increasing (or inhibiting) access; these include gender, race, ethnicity, age, linguistic background and geographic location (rural vs. urban) (e.g. Shade, 2002).

A third type of research focus examines the ways in which computer-mediated communication supports "virtual communities" or societies (e.g. Jones, 1998) and social networks (Wellman, 1997), as well as impacts on or reshapes democratic practices (e.g. Hagen, 2000; Elberse, Hale & Dutton, 2000). Pippa Norris (1999) groups ideas about how the Internet may affect politics into mobilization theories, which claim that Internet use will facilitate and encourage new forms of political activism, and reinforcement theories, which suggest that the Internet will strengthen, but not transform, existing patterns of political participation. Ott and Rosser (2000) found a correlation between measures of Internet access and political and economic freedom in African countries, and argued that the Internet may be instrumental in promoting democracy in Africa. A final set of societal-level studies explore the Internet's capacity to enhance some fields of

human activities, including academic research (e.g. Bkhait, 2000), teaching (e.g. Kuechler, 1999), distance learning (e.g. Karuppan, 2001), collaborative work and research (e.g. Benbunan-Fich & Hiltz, 1999), and health care (e.g. Riva, 2000). Although this group of literature is often informative, it offers little of use for the research project of this dissertation.

More relevant to this study is the body of research which draws on the "Diffusion of Innovation" theory to describe and predict the rate of Internet diffusion in a given society. In general, this body of literature is rich with background information on the demographics and psychological traits of those people most likely to adopt the Internet, their media use patterns and the perceived characteristics of the technology that influence its rate of adoption. Diffusion studies suggest that early adopters of the Internet are upscale, better-educated, younger adults. They propose a number of factors as the most salient predictors of Internet adoption. These are: adopters' communication needs and media-use patterns (Atkin et al, 1998), product knowledge and the perceived internal/external advantages of the technology (Lin, 1998), innovativeness and opinion leadership (Weir, 1999). However, since diffusion studies have led to very conflicting results, adoption predictors alone turn out to be less efficacious than initially believed.

They used to be complemented with information on those factors that serve as barriers to Internet adoption. Lin (1998) and Katz & Aspden (1997) identify the complexity of computer/Internet technology, lack of innovativeness, and limitations on financial resources as significant barriers to the adoption of the Internet. El-Nawawy (1998) pinpoints the following obstacles to the diffusion of the Internet in Egypt. They are: a) the lack of an

information technology infrastructure, b) low individual income, c) language barriers, and d) the lack of awareness and computer illiteracy. Together these approaches help to explain the slower adoption of Internet technology in Egypt than in North America and Europe.

The Internet and Interaction among Individuals and groups

At the level of individuals and groups, there is a growing body of Internet studies dealing with users' activities and interpersonal interaction. The first group of such studies is based on the Uses and Gratification (U&G) Theory. Although the uses-and-gratification approach has not been prevalent in the communication literature in recent years, the emergence of the Internet, as Ruggiero (2000) notes, has revived this approach, as it provides an expedient theoretical framework for studying new media in their start-up phases (2000, p. 3). U&G studies propose that users' engagement with the Internet is motivated by social and psychological needs that generate a variety of expectations of the medium, which, in turn, lead to differential patterns of Internet use. Many U&G studies draw on the traditional media-related needs that have been identified for the conventional media (e.g. needs for information, entertainment, relaxation, escape, human company, etc.) to account for people's motives for using the Internet and the gratifications sought from this new interactive medium (e.g. Perse & Dunn, 1998; Yoo, 1996). Other studies explore the new uses, which the Internet might be better able to fill, than the traditional media. For instance, the 10th WWW User Survey conducted by the Graphic, Visualization and Usability Center, Georgia Tech. (1998), reveals that online users use the web mainly for education, information, work, entertainment, shopping, communication, and time

wasting. In his study of Internet uses in Egypt and other Arab countries, Samy Taye (2000) shows that Egyptian and Arab youth use the Internet for news and information (91.5%), entertainment and time wasting (88.8%), communication (45.5%), and shopping (1.9%). Overall, although U&G research sheds significant light on users' activities and gratifications, they concentrate only on the micro level of social existence—that of the psychology of the individual. Little attention has been paid to the macro-social level, the ideological, cultural or political orientations of various user groups.

Another body of research explores Internet usage patterns and online activities in their relationship to demographic variables (e.g. Teo, 2001), gender, and race/ethnicity (e.g., Korgen et al., 2001). A third group of research concentrates on the ways in which computer-mediated communication support interaction among widely dispersed individuals and groups (Parks, 1996). Much of this research further examines how the technical features of the medium facilitate or hinder interaction. For instance, anonymity and the absence of status and position cues have been considered an equalizing force, which empowers individual users in the computer-mediated communication setting. In contrast, the absence of these social cues has also been found to be responsible for uninhibited exchanges, such as "flaming" (e.g. Sproull & Kiesler, 1991). Additionally, there is a growing body of interdisciplinary research, focusing on social interaction, human behavior, and the presentation of the self online (e.g. Turkle 1997). Although reliance on virtual relationships has been criticized for reducing social involvement and harming individuals' psychological well-being, fostering feelings of loneliness, isolation and depression (Kraut et al., 1998), there are many positive social

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aspects in these virtual relationships. Overall, these studies offer significant insights into individual and group activities on the Internet and the consequences of online interaction. However, they are of limited use for this dissertation, which focuses primarily on media producers.

More important for this thesis is the growing body of literature that examines the use of the Internet as a news medium. Given the importance of the Internet as a news source and the growing tendency of the media industry to appropriate the new technology to carve out their virtual space on the online frontier, many professionals, critics and researchers have contributed an extraordinary number of studies that investigate the new phenomenon of online news/online journalism. This literature appears in trade journals, online magazines and scholarly journals. In trade journals, articles with titles such as "The future of online journalism" (*Columbia Journalism Review,* July/August 1997) are commonplace. Although these articles are insightful, their conclusions tend to be based on anecdotal evidence. Online sources and magazines (such as the *CMC Magazine, AJR Newslink, Netly News, WebWeek, Newslink Network, CJR Online,* and *Editor & Publisher Interactive*) generally provide statistics and practical answers to issues concerning online news. These may include trends, figures and analysis of the characteristics of online news ventures and the interplay between commercial and editorial content. However, the analysis presented lacks the underpinning of a theoretical framework. This problem does not afflict studies in scholarly journals, which have provided important insights for this thesis. They can be grouped into three general categories: studies of Internet news production, use, and features of the online medium.

Online News Production

This body of literature calls attention to the changes in organizational culture and professional practices as a result of the adoption of online services. For instance, Riley, Keough, Meilich, & Pierson, (1998) report that the production practices of the print journalism are changing to more closely resemble a broadcast model of operation. Because the Internet allows 24-hour news coverage and instant updating, it shifts production practices away from the daily routines and deadlines of the print newsroom to a continuous production model, featuring up-to-the-minute reporting. This body of literature also reports the challenges facing journalists in the constantly changing, interactive environment of the online news medium. By contrast, Shannon Martin (1998) asserts that traditional newsroom practices remain relatively unchanged despite the addition of online news services. Although the migration from a newsprint delivery to a digital delivery system allows more data to be included, as well as enabling the use of multimedia models to blend text with audio and video capabilities, these developments do not necessarily lead to profound changes in journalistic culture or in the traditional practices of news making (1998, pp. 68-72). Other researchers argue that the networked structure of the online medium not only reshapes the flow of information, but also makes the application of traditional print and broadcast media standards "unnatural" and rather problematic (Newhagen & Levy, 1998, p. 16). Another group of studies focus on the online news producers, their professional backgrounds, activities and work routines (e.g. Singer et al., 1999; Neubergur et al., 1998). In general, this body of research offers useful preliminary information about possible changes in news organizations and the culture of online newsrooms.

Use of the online news medium

The second category of online news studies concentrates on how people use the Internet news medium. From a social-psychological perspective, a number of researchers explore users' attitudes, beliefs and behavior towards online news sources (e.g. Sundar, 1999, Sundar, 1998, Stempel & Hargrove, 1996), their preferences for online journalism (Schierhorn et al., 1999), and their beliefs about online newspaper credibility (e.g. Johnson & Kaya 1998). Other studies have used experimental designs to examine the impact of specific strategies of online news presentation on the user. For instance, Oostendorp & Nimwegen (1998) investigate how different navigational strategies influence the way users locate information in online newspapers. These studies provide preliminary information to understand the usage of the online medium and its place in comparison with traditional news media.

Features of the Online Medium

The structure of the Internet and its potential to transform the one-way, asymmetrical mode of communication of traditional news media into a more egalitarian, two-way or multi-directional mode are the focus of the third category of online news research. The single most examined issue in this group of studies is interactivity. A common approach has been to list a group of features that supposedly represent interactivity, and to assess how interactive a given news site is, based on the presence or absence of these features (e.g. Massey & Levy, 1999; Schultz, 1999). Most of these studies show that online news publications have low levels of interactivity in general. Although many online newspapers provide users with relatively complex choices of

news content and list the e-mail addresses of key editors, most do not provide other channels for user interactivity such as online forums, chat rooms and customizable news services.

Further, Kenney Gorelik, & Mwangi (2000) examine the effects of financing (profit vs. non-profit), and publication type (pure Web-based vs. print-imported versions) on the degree of interactivity of news sites. They conclude that for-profit online papers remain committed to their corporate ideology and the one-way, traditional transmission model of communication. Not-for-profit papers, in contrast, include more interactive devices, providing more options for interpersonal communication. Pure online news sites are also found to be more interactive than online sites of print papers. Other studies have gone beyond assessing the presence of interactive features to study users' behavior in online forums, their motivation for participation and their perceptions of the interactive discussion space (e.g. Light & Rogers, 1999). Still others examine the communication between journalists and readers via e-mail as well as communication patterns among readers in online forums (e.g. Schultz, 2000). Although these studies provide valuable insights into the use of some interactive features, they are often based on partial and ill-defined concepts of interactivity. Lumping together a number of interactive options, these studies contribute little toward the building of a systematic and comprehensive definition of interactivity.

Overall, while the literature identifies a range of issues that contribute to a better understanding of Internet technology and its impacts, it is greatly lacking in theoretical

and methodological approaches that examine the social construction of the Internet—that is, the complex interactions between technical and social elements. On this count, the social constructivist approach, proposed by William Dutton and Jay Blumler (1989) stands out as a comprehensive perspective from which to study new communication technologies. It is this approach, which I will rely on in this dissertation. Dutton and Blumler argue that technological change takes place in both a social and a historical context, which is embedded with interests, beliefs and value systems. "The prospects posed by technological change," they continue, "are not universal. They vary across nations that develop, implement, govern, and use the new technologies in different ways" (1989, p. 63). The social implications of communication technology, they maintain, are shaped not only by the process of technological change, but also by the "national setting [that] encompasses a variety of factors that mediate and differentiate the national responses to technological change" and by the "national policy" that organizes, regulates and controls new communication media (1989, pp. 66-67).

Dutton and Blumler propose a number of analytic categories to examine how society responds to, interprets and controls technological developments; how different interest groups shape the technology; how political and legal frameworks mediate its application and use; and how people adopt and choose to use it. This framework will help situate Internet technology within the wider social context of Egyptian society. The Internet's social implications are conceived of not as an inherent property of the technology, but as the product of complex processes that intermingle the technological and social elements, the prospects of this new medium and the realities of organizational

and social settings, the universal characteristics of the Internet and the particular implementation and use of it in Egypt.

In addition, I will use Bolter and Grusin's (1999) theory of "remediation" to explain how the Internet news medium grew in Egypt and how it has positioned itself within the existing media landscape. In response to the demands of "remediation", this medium gives rise to new regimes of content creation and new practitioners with new competencies. As such, Bolter and Grusin's theory provides a link-up with Dutton and Blumler's (1989) more historical and organizational approach, by emphasizing the Internet's dialectic relationship to older media, and by elucidating its unique characteristics, which impact the presentation and meaning of its online news texts.

Methods and Evidence

Multiple research strategies and methods are required to study the place of the Internet in Egyptian society and the ways it functions as a news medium. As I have mentioned, I will apply the theoretical framework proposed by Dutton and Blumler to examine the social construction of the Internet. This framework is based on the hypothesis that the implications of communication technology are shaped not only by the capacity of the technology itself, but also by the "national settings and policies" that shape the development and use of the technology. To understand the multiple social processes that shape Egyptian society's responses to the Internet, I will analyze published reports and documents about the development of the Internet and Internet-related policies in Egypt. These include the reports published by the United Nations, the World Bank, the

International Telecommunication Union, the Information Society Promotion Office of the European Commission, the Egyptian Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, the Internet Society of Egypt, and the American Chamber of Commerce in Egypt about information and communication technologies, telecommunication infrastructure and Internet developments, initiatives and policies in Egypt. I will also report findings from my interviews of Internet policy makers in the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, the Egyptian Cabinet's Information and Decision Support Center, the Egyptian Universities Network, and the National Institute for Telecommunications. In addition, the analysis will be informed by the findings of user surveys in Egypt and informal interviews I conducted with a group of Internet users from my faculty.

To clarify the nature of the online news medium and changes in news organizations with the adoption of online services, I will conduct case studies of two Egyptian media institution's web sites. These media institutions are *Al-Ahram* (The Pyramids), the largest and most influential government newspaper, and *Al-Wafd* (The Delegation), the most widely read opposition newspaper in Egypt. These two organizations were selected as representative of the two most significant types of print media: government and party newspapers. The fundamentally different editorial policies, size and economic resources of both organizations have greatly impacted their print-news products and, it is believed, might well influence their perception and use of the Internet news medium. As these two organizations differ greatly from one another in terms of ownership, political orientation and financial resources, it is likely that their online

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products will also be dissimilar, thus making for a richer and more insightful study of the structure and the content of the online medium. Here too in-depth interviews with online news producers of *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd* are conducted. Seven online editors, the supervisor, the web developer, and the web designer of the *Al-Ahram* news site, as well as all online editors and the managing editor of the *Al-Wafd* site were interviewed. These interviews probe online producers' perceptions of the Internet news medium, their definitions of the distinctive features of online news, and their interpretations of the unique nature of online publishing. The interviews also investigate the production of online news and the gate-keeping process by exploring daily work routines, organizational policies and constraints, and the practices and values of online editors (Appendix A).

A second level of online news analysis will be carried out through a comparative content analysis of *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd* print and online products. This analysis will center on an examination of the gate-keeping philosophies of both organizations as they are reflected in the content. By analyzing news stories selected for online use—their topics, focuses, and origins—and comparing them with print news stories published in the two newspapers, the gate-keeping process will be clarified (Appendix B). Another level of textual analysis will examine the impact of the structural features of the Internet on the meaning and form of the news texts. Here, I use the word *text* in a broad sense so that it includes not only the written word, but also the multimedia images and sound features common on Internet sites. The textual analysis will investigate four significant features of

online news: intertextuality, multimodality, reader involvement in content creation, and dynamism (Appendix C).

Finally, to evaluate the impact of the Internet news medium on the communication system and the structure of the media landscape, interviews with media experts from the three most distinctive constituencies—government, party and independent newspapers—making use of this new technology in Egypt, will be conducted. Ten media experts, including chief editors, assistant and managing editors and senior journalists (Appendix D), were interviewed to probe their assessment of the existing media structure, the unique features of the online news medium, and the influence of this communication technology on the media landscape and society at large (Appendix E). By using these multiple methodologies and strategies, a clearer picture of the social construction of the Internet, its use as a news medium will emerge, and it will be possible to begin to chart the challenges it poses to Egypt's existing communication system and media culture.

Outline of Chapters

Chapter two, *Communication Systems in Egypt: Old Media and the Internet*, presents a skeletal analysis of the structures of the print and electronic media in Egypt. It also identifies the socio-political constraints and regulatory bodies that have been set up by the state to create communication policies and monitor social communication issues. It then examines the historical development of the Internet in Egypt and how social interest groups have constructed this new technology. The new institutional arrangements, laws, regulations, programs and policies that have been established to

organize and govern Internet access and use are also analyzed, and the impact of communication culture and environmental resources and constraints are considered. Finally, the chapter investigates how the social shaping of the Internet mediates the implications of this technological change in society.

Chapter three, *The Internet as a News Medium: Al-Ahram and Al-Wafd Online Services*, explicates the nature of the Internet news medium and its distinctive communication architecture. It also relates *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd* online news producers' perception of this new technology and its structure. It then analyzes the gate-keeping processes that shape online news production in both sites. Organizational policies and constraints, daily work routines, and online editors' practices, values and images of their audiences are all examined as significant determinants in opening (or closing) the online news gates, and thereby shaping the online news product.

Chapter four, *Online News Content and The Study of its Stylistic Features*, presents the findings of the comparative content analysis of *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd* online and print products. It compares the news stories and editorials selected for the online products with those published in both newspapers. It also investigates the textual and stylistic features of the online texts. The unique characteristics of the Internet provide new ways of managing and communicating information, new forms of mediation and representation, new levels of intertextuality, and new patterns of negotiating meaning. The Internet medium, therefore, structures online text in a distinctive way, affecting both the presentation of the text and its meaning.

Chapter five, *The Impact of the Online News Medium: Prospects for Liberalization*, presents media experts' assessment of the existing communication systems in Egypt, and their views on the potential impact of the new online medium on communications culture and the mass media regime. It also investigates the implications of the online medium for the emerging public sphere. It argues that the open structure of the new medium enables individuals, social and political groups, and civil society organizations to disseminate their news and information, to expose their opinions and views, and to engage in discussions and debates on public issues. The online medium thus expands the public sphere and poses a new challenge to the dominance of the state in the public domain.

Finally, chapter six, *Conclusion,* reflects on the social construction of the Internet in Egypt so that we may better understand how the social setting affects the development and use of a new technology and mediates its social implications. In addition, it synthesizes the findings on the use of the Internet as a news medium and its disruptive impact on the Egyptian communications structure and mass media regime. It also proposes future directions for the study of the Internet medium in Egypt.

Chapter 2

Communication Systems in Egypt:
Old Media and the Internet

The Arab Republic of Egypt is located in the northeast corner of the African continent. It is bordered by the Mediterranean Sea to the north, Sudan to the south, Libya to the west, and the Red Sea, Palestine and Israel to the east. It forms a total area of 1,002,000 square kilometers, but the inhabited area is no more than 55,367 square kilometers (only 5.5% of the total area) and the rest of the land is covered mainly by desert (State Information Service Yearbook, 2001, p. 13). The roots of Egyptian civilization go back more than 6,000 years to the beginning of settled life along the banks of the Nile River. The country has "an unusual geographical and cultural unity that has given the Egyptian people a strong sense of identity and a pride in their heritage as descendants of humankind's earliest civilized community" (Metz, 1990). Both the Sinai Peninsula—the only land bridge between the African and Asian continents— and the Suez Canal—the shortest sea link between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea— are part of Egypt.

The modern history of Egypt dates from 1805, when Mohammed Ali, an Albanian officer who was a representative of the Ottoman Empire, became its ruler. The descendants of Ali ruled the country until the revolution of July 23, 1952, which toppled

the corrupt monarchy and the British occupation. Egypt was declared a republic, bringing first Nagib and then Nasser to power, who remained Egypt's president until his death in 1970. Sadat succeeded Nasser, holding the presidency until his assassination in 1981. He was succeeded by his vice president, Mubarak, who remains head of the state to this day. Since 1952, each of Egypt's presidents has risen from the ranks of the military, which wields considerable authority in the government. Yet the ideological orientation and public policies of the government have shifted considerably with each change in the presidency.

Egypt is one of the most densely populated countries in the Middle East. At present, its population is 67,886,229, nearly 45% of whom live in urban areas (Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics, 2002, p. 5). Cairo is the largest city and the capital. It is commonly regarded as the cultural and political center of the Arab World. Administratively, Egypt is divided into 26 governorates and eight regions: Upper Egypt; Central Egypt; North Upper Egypt; Greater Cairo, the Canal Zone; the Delta; Alexandria; and Matrouh. The official language is Arabic; and Islam is the religion of the state, which also has a large religious minority of Coptic Christians. Education is officially compulsory during the basic nine-year cycle. In 1999, the ratio of school enrolment was equivalent to 76 percent of the school-age population (United Nations Development Programme, 2001). Education at all levels is available free of charge in public schools and universities. However, there are several private schools and some private universities. The adult literacy rate is 54.6 percent (ibid).

Politically, the Egyptian Permanent Constitution of 1971 declared Egypt to be a democratic socialist state based on an alliance of the people's working forces, and it also guarantees the rights of individuals. The Constitution stresses social solidarity, equal opportunity, and popular control of the economy. The Constitution validated a mixed presidential-parliamentary-cabinet system with power concentrated in the hands of the president, who has extensive opportunities to bestow patronage, including the appointment of the vice president(s), the prime minister and the council of ministers, as well as important civil, military and diplomatic officers. The president can also legislate by decree in states of emergency. The president is nominated by the People's Assembly and elected for a six-year term by popular referendum.

The legislature is based on a bicameral system, consisting of the People's Assembly (*Majlis Al-Shaab*), and the Advisory Council (*Majlis Al-Shoura*). The People's Assembly is composed of 444 members, who are elected for five-year terms by direct, secret ballot on the basis of universal adult suffrage; at least 50 percent of elected members must be either workers or farmers. In addition, the president may appoint up to 10 extra members. Generally, the Egyptian People's Assembly functions as "a policy-approving rather than as a policy-initiating body" (Banks, et al., 1998, p. 279). Established in 1980, the Advisory Council consists of 264 members: 176 are elected and 88 are appointed, chosen by the president, all of whom serve six-year terms. The Council functions only in a consultative role. While the president determines the main policy of the state and the cabinet supervises its implementation, ministerial responsibility to the Legislature is constitutionally defined.

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Egypt's legal system is influenced by the Napoleonic Code as well as Islamic law. Many Muslims argue that the *Sharia* or Islamic law should be the sole basis for all Egyptian legislation, and the constitutional amendment of 1980 recognizes the *Sharia* as a principal source of Egypt's laws. Nevertheless, the legal system remains secular in character. The Egyptian constitution guarantees the independence of the Judiciary, and legal decisions are the mandate of judges, since there is no Jury system. A supreme council, headed by the president, supervises and regulates the judicial bodies, however, the highest judicial authority, with the power to determine the constitutionality of laws and regulations, is the Supreme Constitutional Court. In 1992, special military courts were established for the prosecution of persons charged with "terrorist acts."

In June 1977, Egypt adopted a multi-party political system. At present, there are 16 political parties in Egypt. However, only 6 parties exert a certain influence in the public domain. These are the ruling National Democratic Party, the New Wafd Party, the Socialist Liberal Party, the National Progressive Unionist Grouping Party, the Socialist Workers Party and the Nasserist Arab Democratic Party. The National Democratic Party, which is headed by the president of the state, currently dominates about 85 percent of People Assembly seats, and 99 percent of seats in the Advisory Council.

Egypt has a mixed economy, which features extensive government supervision. In 1991, because of the pressing problems of low productivity, economic stagnation, high population growth, inflation, as well as massive external debts, Egypt undertook several International Monetary Fund-supported structural reform measures. The key objective of these reforms was to create a decentralized economy through the privatization of public

enterprises, the reduction in public sector investment in the economy and in social welfare, and the liberalization of trade, investment, banking and exchange systems among others (World Bank, 2001). In 2000, Egypt's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was US$98.3 billion or US$1570 per capita, categorizing Egypt as a low-ranking middle-income country. Agriculture accounted for 16.9 percent of GDP, industry for 33.3 percent, and services for 49.9 percent (World Bank, 2002). Unemployment remains a crucial challenge. Solving the employment problem is critical not only for the economy, but also for the purposes of social stability. Current official estimates place unemployment at 7.6 percent; the labor force, at about 18 million, is growing at an annual rate of 2.7 percent (State Information Service Yearbook, 2001, p. 91). Egypt ranks 105th out of 162 states in the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Human Development Index, meaning that the country has a medium human development. This Index is based on a group of indicators, including life expectancy at birth, adult literacy, education, school enrolment, and GDP per capita (United Nations Development Programme, 2001).

Media Structure In Egypt

The structure of media in any society responds to the nature of the political system, as well as the economic, social and the overall cultural context. In his typology of the Arab media, William Rugh (1979) classified Egyptian media under the category of "mobilized press," characterized by total subordination of the media to the political system, functioning under the auspices of the revolutionary government (1979, p. 32).

This classification, though it has some validity, is insufficient for understanding the current dynamics that govern the Egyptian media system and account for its position in society. It offers an unrealistic static categorization of media structure, failing to take into account changes in the socio-political context. As different political systems bring about different forms of media organization and control, the structure of print and broadcast media have changed, reflecting the new socio-political context and the new functions that media institutions are positioned to perform.

Print Media

The first newspaper in Egypt, *Courier de l'Egypte*, was started under Napoleon Bonaparte during the French invasion of Egypt and was primarily intended to "inform and instruct French expeditionary forces and improve their morale" (Rugh, 1979, p. 6). In 1828, the first indigenous Egyptian newspaper in Arabic, *Al-Waqai' Al-Masriyah* (Egyptian Events) was published by Egypt's modernizing ruler, Muhammad Ali (Sabat, 1983, p. 85). The British colonization of Egypt in 1881 prompted the Egyptian press to play an active, patriotic role, engaging in a fierce struggle against the political and colonial authorities. The great watershed for the Egyptian press, however, was the July 1952 revolution, a veritable social and cultural explosion that destroyed the old regime, created a new set of institutions and gave rise to a radically new political order, including the mass media system. The new regime had a political agenda that implied a contradictory attitude to fundamental democratic values. On the one hand, revolutionary leaders professed, and had fought for, ideals of liberation, independence, egalitarianism

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and democracy; on the other hand they had often done this on the basis of socialist ideology tinged by authoritarianism. In few places was this contradiction clearer than in Egypt. The first years of the revolution witnessed the transformation of the press into a non-partisan centrality, characterized by a greater degree of uniformity and loyalty to the government. The regime abolished political parties and their newspapers, and took several measures to control the press including the censorship and closure of critical newspapers, and the imprisonment of dissenting journalists (Dabbous, 1993, pp. 104-105). At the same time, the regime established its own publishing houses and founded a number of newspapers and magazines to promote the support of its goals. The regime also created "a monopoly political party, the National Union, thus reducing diversity of political views and freedom of debating public issues in the press" (Nasser, 1990, p. 3).

In the 1960s, the organization of the entire press underwent a drastic change that profoundly influences its present structure. Against a backdrop of dissatisfaction with the performance of the press, the political regime on May 24, 1960 passed a law nationalizing all privately owned press organizations. The new law stipulated that the ownership of the nation's four largest private publishing houses—*Dar Al-Ahram, Dar Akhbar Al-Yom, Dar Al-Hilal* and *Dar Rose Al-Youssef*— was to be transferred to the National Union, which already owned the *Dar al-Tahrir* publishing house. No newspapers could be published without the permission of the National Union, which was also given power to license press institutions and to designate boards of directors to manage the established publishing houses (Amin & Napoli, 2000, p. 179). These new changes while designed to permit the government to mobilize the press behind the planned socialist measures,

reasserted the authoritarian premise that government should maintain a monopoly over information. Mass media should support government policies and serve as a tool for social control (Sibert et al., 1956, p. 20). There was also a greater centralization of publishing in Cairo.

In the 1970s, the Egyptian press entered a new phase. In the course of orienting the country toward the liberalization of its political structures and democracy, the new political regime headed by president Sadat removed direct censorship (while retaining government control of the press) and adopted a multi-party system. Under the 1977 Parties Law, each party was given the right to publish its own newspapers. Initially, the party press was very effective in its criticism of state policies. But when criticism grew bolder and sharper, the regime took legal measures to silence its critics. Both the Law of Protection of the Internal Front and Social Peace and the Law of Shame were specifically introduced by the regime to suppress the party press criticism of government policies. Thus, although the regime promoted opposition parties and expressed a more open attitude toward the press, it still took an authoritarian approach to the regime/press relationship; the government failed to provide a democratic atmosphere within which the political parties and their respective press could operate. Commenting on the political system during this period, Mona Makram (1989) argues that the implementation of pluralism during Sadat's era remained "tentative, non-uniform, superficial and occasionally fictitious" (1989, p. 24). As well, Dabbous (1997) states that the press in this period simply continued to be viewed as a "state-controlled instrument for managing public opinion" (1997, p. 63). In the final analysis, however, the changes in the political

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structure constituted the groundwork for the diversification of the Egyptian press. For the first time in decades, political parties were allowed to publish their own papers and to express their own views.

At present, although the press enjoys relative freedom and shows some diversity and independence, government interference is still high. As Napoli and Amin (1997) argue, the government's public adherence to the principle of a free press remains "a thin veneer for practices that continually vacillate between tolerance and repression" (1997, p. 193). Generally, there are three categories of mechanisms by which the state maintains control over the press. The first is political—that is the law-making, censoring, and regulatory power of the government. The legal framework that regulates the press is based on the Egyptian constitution and a group of laws, including "the Law of Publication," "the Penal Code," "the Law of Organization of the Press," and "the Law of Press Syndicate," in addition to some other general laws that contain articles related to expression and press freedoms.

Although the constitution stresses the freedom of the press, the reality proves to be much more complex than its avowed intentions. According to Article 48 of the constitution,

> Freedom of the press, printing, publication and mass media shall be guaranteed. Censorship on newspapers shall be prohibited as well as notifying, suspending or confiscating them by administrative orders. In a state of emergency or in a time of war, limited censorship may be imposed on the newspapers, publications and mass media in matters related to public safety or for purposes of national security in accordance with the law" (The Constitution of Arab Republic of Egypt, 1999/1971, p. 9)

However, Amin and Napoli (2000) argue,

In theory, there is no press censorship, but in fact censorship permeates every aspect of expression in Egypt—not just newspapers, but broadcasting, theater, movies, magazines, and books. The principal censoring organization is the office of censorship in the ministry of culture, but other organizations that exercise censoring authority include the ministry of the interior, ministry of information, Al-Azhar University, the state information service, the office of the president, and even the Egyptian post office" (2000, p. 186).

On the other hand, since the assassination of Anwar Al-Sadat in 1981, Egypt has been ruled under an Emergency Law that permits the authorities to impose pre-publication censorship, to confiscate newspapers, or to close down publishing houses in the interest of "public safety" or "national security." Further, the state of emergency allows for the prosecution of journalists before state security courts and military-style tribunals whose decisions cannot be appealed.

Additionally, the Egyptian Penal Code has a chapter on "crimes of the press" (The Penal Code, Chapter 14: Articles 171-201). Most of these crimes are loosely worded, using vague phrases such as damage to the nation's reputation, national unity, or social peace, and thus allow for a wide variety of interpretations to be used by the authorities to repress and curtail public expression and press freedom (Farahat, 1993, p. 43). Under the Penal Code, journalists can be heavily fined or imprisoned for insulting the president, the army, high-level officials, the security forces, or parliament. Bans on press coverage of certain sensitive topics are relatively commonplace. Similarly, although the Organization of the Press law (issued in 1996) asserts in its first article that the press is an independent popular authority performing its mission freely, that law is, in fact, based on the same authoritarian philosophy that had informed all previous publication and press laws in Egypt, "putting total allegiance to authority over individual and press freedoms in the

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name of national interests" (Amin, 2002, p. 131). According to the law, individuals are not allowed to own newspapers; only joint stock companies comprised of public or private legal entities, corporate bodies, or political parties are allowed to establish publishing companies. To start a paper through such companies, the law imposes severe financial preconditions. For example, the law requires that a proposed daily newspaper must maintain a level of capital at one million Egyptian Pounds (nearly US$250,000) and a weekly newspaper at E£250,000 Egyptian Pounds (nearly US$62,500). It requires that the state-controlled "Supreme Press Council" approve and license new publications. As well, for a journalist to work for a foreign newspaper, he/she needs to have a license from the Press Council. This Council also supervises the Egyptian Press Syndicate, membership in which is required for anyone who wants to work as a journalist. The distribution of foreign newspapers and magazines is allowed only with government permission. The Department of Censorship in the Ministry of Communication has the authority to censor, confiscate or ban such publications. As well, the Ministry of the Interior has the authority to stop specific issues of foreign publications from entering the country on the grounds of protecting public order.

A second type of control mechanism is economic in nature. With regard to the official press, the state assures itself of loyalty through its control of the actual owner of the press, the Consultative Council, which is dominated by the ruling National Party. Journalists working for official newspapers are aware, without being told so explicitly, that they are expected to promote policies and programs adopted by the regime. Although they can be critical of some government policies and mid-ranking officials who are not at

the centers of power, serious deviation from the editorial line can result in dismissal or suspension of journalists from work. For most journalists, the threat of being barred from their profession is a strong incentive to conform. On the other hand, journalists who demonstrate loyalty and show promise are rewarded with benefits, ranging from promotion to higher responsibilities within the government apparatus to access to inside information that enhances their role as journalists.

Party and independent newspapers are subject to several economic pressures. As Napoli and Amin (1997) argue, these newspapers generally have "poor facilities and extremely limited financial resources, in part because the most important advertisers are in the public sector and use most of their advertising budget on government media" (1997, p. 196). Government subsidies are granted to party newspapers, making them at least partly dependent. The party and independent press also relies on the government printing and distribution facilities, and thus allows the government to control the production of their publications. Thus, through the use of advertising revenue by government agencies, subsidies to the party press, and control of printing and distribution facilities, the government exercises economic control over non-official newspapers.

A third type of control mechanism is cultural. Brian McNair (1998) argues that in the "dominance" paradigm of journalism, which maintains relations of domination and subordination between fundamentally unequal groups in society and thus sustains and reproduces the social system,

> Many journalists, particularly those who reach the top of their profession, are recruited from a relatively narrow and privileged sector of society, where they have been reared to accept as 'natural', or as given, certain value systems and ideological positions which favour the dominant social

groups in society—groups to which they themselves may belong, or wish
to belong. Either way, these values and ideas structure their ways of seeing
and reporting the world—their *interpretive frameworks*" (1998, pp. 24-25).

The state, thus, further controls the official press through its influence over personnel assignments, which are based on complete loyalty to and unconditional support of the political elite. All government newspapers' directors and chief editors are appointed by the Consultative Council. They contribute substantially to the maintenance of the political and social system and the reproduction of dominant elite values. In addition to socializing citizens into the status quo, chief editors clamp down critical journalists who overstep certain boundaries. Hence, between the stick of legal sanctions, economic pressures, and the carrot of promotion and access, the government's control mechanisms tighten their grip on the press.

The various control mechanisms have also spawned a new control method, which has found its way into newsrooms and especially into journalists' minds—that is, self-censorship, which has become a common phenomenon among journalists. In covering sensitive issues involving high-level officials, the army and security forces, editors and journalists often censor themselves. Yet, despite the many restrictions, there is still a relative margin of freedom in Egyptian media and the press is moving up on the freedom scale. As some Egyptian journalists stressed at the conference of The Middle East Media Forum, co-sponsored by the Washington-based Freedom Forum and Al-Ahram Regional Press Institute (1998), Egypt has witnessed some improvements in press freedom the past two decades, with more emphasis on the duty of the press to

represent political and cultural diversity, something that has been absent for a long time (Sandeen, 1998).

At present, the Egyptian press is quite diverse, with a variety of state-owned, party-controlled and independent outlets that widely differ in levels of sophistication. The official press, owned by the Consultative Council, dominates the publishing scene. There are 16 state-owned newspapers, including seven dailies and nine weeklies. Four of the 16 are published in English or French and the remaining 12 are published in Arabic. There are also 38 state-owned weekly and monthly magazines and periodicals. The most widely read dailies are *Al-Ahram,* which has a daily circulation of 600,000 copies and 900,000 copies on Fridays (the weekend edition), and *Al-Akhbar,* which distributes 750,000 copies daily and one million copies of its weekly issue. The government papers take advantage of the substantial financial and technical resources belonging to the state, maintaining a virtual dominance over the press market. However, they do not enjoy a high level of credibility and many journalists working for this press are "frequently suspected for being politically motivated rather than professionally dedicated solely to accurate, factual reporting and enlightenment of the public" (Rugh, 1979, p. 12). Yet, government newspapers have recently fostered credibility through inviting prominent intellectuals to write comment pieces despite the fact that many contradict the editorial policies of these papers. However, because of its official nature, top-down communication model, and its failure to provide accurate and timely information, the government press, Hamada (2000) argues, has generally a limited effect on setting the public discussion agenda in Egypt (1996, p. 17).

Until recently, the only true competitor of state-owned media was the party press. There are five major party newspapers: the daily *Al-Wafd* (distributing 250,000 copies per day), the daily *Al-Ahrar* (distributing 50,000 copies per day), the weekly *Al-Ahaly* and *Al-Arabi* (together distributing less than 65,000 copies per week), and the bi-weekly *Al-Shaab* (currently suspended by the Political Party Commission). The editors of party papers retain control over all editorial policies, and the papers frequently publish criticism of government officials and policies. However, the party press has restricted access to government information sources, as government officials deliberately use many tactics to "withhold news and information from reporters working for the party press" (Nasser, 1990, p. 22). They have severe economic difficulties and are dependent on the government for newsprint and distribution. These economic and political restrictions have negative effects on the quality, circulation, and influence of the party press.

The third category is the independent press, which entered the Egyptian market in the past seven years such as *Al-Midan* (1995), *Al-Isboa* (1997), and *Saut Al-Omma* (1999). These newspapers distinguish themselves from the politically controlled papers with a more balanced and objective reporting approach, and a stronger adherence to professional standards. They present an alternative journalistic service that addresses different needs and areas of interest of the readers. However, journalists at these newspapers sometimes feel pressured by the shareholders to defend a particular position because it is in the shareholder's interest. Furthermore, the importance of circulation revenues as the main financial resource leads some of these papers to seek to expand their readership by publishing sexually sensational material. Although this undoubtedly

increases their circulation, it permits the authorities to organize campaigns against all independent papers, accusing them of subverting social and moral values.

In addition, because of the difficulty of obtaining licenses, several Egyptian newspaper and magazine publishers have been forced to obtain foreign licenses and then distribute their products as "foreign" publications. Over 100 titles now register abroad, usually in Cyprus, and then bring their publications back into Egypt. Many publishers then seek state permission to print in a free trade zone within the country. Foreign-licensed independent newspapers are subject to pre-censorship by the Ministry of Communication. Most of these papers have very limited circulation. Generally speaking, the circulation of all newspapers and magazines is rather low. The high rate of illiteracy limits the mass circulation of the press. Furthermore, the low development and economic problems of the country further affect the size and distribution. In addition, the low per capita income makes the price of a newspaper a heavy burden for many Egyptians (Arafa, 1995, p. 29). While all government, party and independent newspapers, as well as some foreign-licensed papers distribute on a national level to all Egyptian areas, press circulation is generally concentrated in major urban centers. The capital city of Cairo is by far the most important media market in Egypt. It is the center of the media industry, and virtually all major newspapers are published in the Cairo area.

Broadcast Media

Egypt has the largest and most influential broadcasting system in the Arab region. Radio did not originate as a government-operated monopoly but as a private venture. In

the early 1920s, radio amateurs established several commercial stations, mostly located in Cairo (El-Halwani, 1982, p. 70). These private stations, however, stopped operating in the early 1930s, as the government decided that radio should be a state activity; the governmental radio service began broadcasting on May 31, 1934. The revolution of 1952 marked a new era in Egyptian broadcasting in which the regime devoted a great deal of attention to radio, establishing new stations and expanding its services and technical facilities in order to exploit the Radio as the "voice of the revolution" (Boyd, 1999, p. 19). In less than a decade, as Rugh (1979) notes, the government increased transmitter power 28-fold, providing good reception throughout the country and abroad. As well, the regime ensured more direct control over broadcasting, using it as "a political tool to mobilize the masses and propagate the official line," capitalizing on its capacity to overcome the illiteracy barrier and to penetrate every single village in Egypt (1979, p. 116).

At present, the Egyptian Radio consists of nine networks that broadcast 169132 hours during 2000-2001, with a daily average of 463 hours (Egyptian Television and Radio Union Yearbook, 2001, p. 59). These networks are the General Program, the Holy Quran, the Middle East, the Youth and Sports, Voice of the Arabs, the Local Service, the Cultural Service, the Specialized Service, and the Beamed Service (see Table 2.1). Powerful transmitters made most of these programs audible over all of Egypt and in most Arab countries as well. Most households in Egypt have at least one radio. The total number of radio sets in 1997 was estimated to be 20.5 million, or 30 radios for every 100 individuals (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 1999).

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Table 2.1 Egyptian Broadcast Networks

Broadcast Network	Service Started	Broadcast Hrs/Day
The General Program	31/05/1934	24:00
The Holly Quran	29/03/1964	24:00
The Middle East	03/05/1964	24:00
Youth and Sports	06/10/1975	24:00
Voice of the Arabs (includes 3 Programs)		
Voice of The Arabs Program	04/07/1953	24:00
Palestine Program	29/10/1960	07:00
The Nile Valley Program	01/01/1984	04:00
Local Services (includes 10 Programs)		
Alexandria Program	26/07/1953	19:19
Greater Cairo Program	01/04/1981	21:26
Middle Delta Program	22/07/1982	18:09
North Upper Egypt Program	13/05/1983	16:18
North Sinai Program	25/04/1984	18:08
South Sinai Program	23/04/1985	15:23
The Canal Program	25/10/1988	19:02
Al-Wadi Al-Gadid Program	01/06/1990	15:08
Matrouh Program	31/05/1991	16:23
South Upper Egypt Program	31/05/1993	13:37
Cultural Services (include 3 Programs)		
The European Program	31/05/1934	20:20
The Cultural Program	01/05/1957	08:00
The Musical Program	01/03/1968	24:00
Specialized Services (includes 4 Programs)		
The Educational Program	01/01/1999	12:00
The Elderly Program	17/06/2000	08:00
News Program	17/06/2000	08:00
Songs Program	17/06/2000	12:00
Foreign Languages and Beamed Services (includes 45 Programs broadcast 70:10 h/d in 35 Languages		

Source: Egyptian Radio and Television Union Yearbook, 2002

The Egyptian television system was established in 1960. It is considered one of the most extensive television systems among all developing countries. At present, the system encompasses two national and six local channels (see Table 2.2). In addition, satellite broadcasting, which started in the 1990s, comprises three channels: the Egyptian Satellite Channel (ESC), which broadcasts 24 hours daily, covering most of the world countries; Nile TV International, which broadcasts in English and French 14 hours daily; and, the Egyptian Satellite '2' that airs 24 hours daily, covering the Middle East, Europe, and North Africa (Ministry of Communication, 1999, pp. 85-91). Between 1998 and 2000, Egypt launched its own satellites, NileSat 101 and 102, which carry twenty-four transponders, with a capability of transmitting 180 digital television channels and 800 radio stations across the Arab World, Middle East, North Africa and Europe (State Information Service, 2001, p. 277). Currently, Egypt uses NileSat to broadcast a group of thematic TV channels, covering news, drama, sports, culture, health, family, and education (Ministry of Communication, 1999, p. 93).

Reception of foreign satellite channels was permitted in the early 1990s; and citizens are allowed to purchase or rent satellite dishes. According to Amin and Napoli (2000), 800,000 households have satellite dishes (2000, p. 183). Furthermore, Pay Television started in 1991, when the Egyptian government established the Cable Network Egypt (CNE). This company now has two distribution systems: one terrestrial and the other through NileSat. More than 40 Egyptian, Arab, and Western channels are directly broadcast through this service (Ministry of Communication, 1999, pp. 270-271). In November 2001, three "private" satellite-based TV stations, transmitted on NileSat, were

Table 2.2: Egyptian Television Channels

Channel	Service Started	Main Area Covered	Broadcast Hrs/Day
Channel 1	21/07/1960	Egypt	23:11
Channel 2	21/07/1961	Egypt	23:05
Channel 3	06/10/1985	Cairo, Giza, Al-Kalubia, and Bordering areas	19:13
Channel 4	06/10/1988	Suez Canal area	16:28
Channel 5	12/12/1990	Alexandria, Al-Behara, and Matrouh	17:12
Channel 6	29/05/1994	Delta area	16:01
Channel 7	29/07/1994	North Upper Egypt	15:35
Channel 8	31/05/1996	South Upper Egypt	14:46

Source: Egyptian Radio and Television Union Yearbook, 2002.

launched, marking a great change in Egyptian government policy. In 1997, Egyptians were estimated to own 7.7 million television sets, or 11 television sets for every 100 individuals (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 1999).

The broadcast media face considerable government control and censorship. According to the 1979 Broadcast Media Law, the Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU) is the sole authority that has the right to establish and own radio and television stations in Egypt. ERTU also has the power to censor all audio/visual materials (Abd El-Megid, 2001, p. 123). Although the law claims that ERTU is an independent organization, authority over broadcasting is placed firmly in the hands of the government. Under the law, the board of governors of ERTU, which is responsible for mapping broad policy decisions, is dominated by official members assigned by the government, without even nominal representation of political parties, social groups or specific audiences (Ibrahim, 1999a, p. 331). Furthermore, ERTU is accountable to the Minister of Information. The structure of the broadcast media is highly centralized, partly because it reflects the country's centralized system of administration, and partly because the basic philosophy governing media structure advocates the use of broadcast media as instruments for social and political control. Even though the state has begun to decentralize the system by introducing a number of local television channels, the control pattern remains unchanged. In his study of the impact of local television channels on the centralized media structure, Al-Wafaei (1995) concludes that the local channels have failed to establish an independent status from the national television network. He points out that local television stations have never been the vehicle for creating communication pluralism;

rather, they are a mere extension of national channels, remotely controlled from the center, Cairo (1995, p. 229).

Moreover, the law requires that broadcast materials be directed at serving the people and the public interest within the context of Egyptian values and traditions, as well as supporting the socialist democratic system, national unity, and social peace. In practice, these principles are interpreted in a way that has kept broadcast media repeating conventional and conservative discourses and limiting free discussions and creative debates. In accordance with these principles, the Board of Governors of ERTU issued a number of successive rules and regulations to ensure that all materials and programs be scanned by the censors before they are broadcast.

In conclusion, print and broadcast media in Egypt are centrally structured under the strict control of the state. The last two decades, however, have witnessed some improvements; the party press has become more active and critical of the government, the official press has begun to diversify its political views, and the private sector has gained a foothold in the Egyptian press and broadcasting systems. Unfortunately, none of these developments represents a major modification of the authoritarian philosophy that governs the organization of the Egyptian media.

The Internet in Egypt: Historical Development

As in many parts of the world, the Internet in Egypt has developed outside the formal telecommunications sector. The first use of Internet services dates back to October 1993, through a linkage established between the Egyptian Universities Network (EUN)

and the European Academic and Research Network. The user community was estimated at that time to be about 2000 to3000, primarily made up of academics (Internet Society of Egypt, 1997a). According to Amr Hashem, manager of Telecommunication Policies Unit of the Ministry of Communications and Information technology, a landmark event that raised awareness within government circles concerning the potential of the Internet was the International Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo, from 5-13 September 1994. To host the meeting, the Egyptian government had to provide a 64kbit/s connection to the Internet for the duration of the conference (Amr Hashem, personal communication, 2002). Following this event, the government, in an effort to raise awareness about the Internet, decided to allow the Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC) of the Egyptian Cabinet and the Regional Information Technology and Software Engineering Center (RITSEC) to offer free Internet access to Egyptian corporations, private and public sector companies, government entities, and other professionals. This free access helped in boosting the rate of growth in Internet users during the first years of its introduction in Egypt. Many organizations, especially small and medium size enterprises, benefited from the service. In addition, "many professionals started utilizing the Internet services in various sectors including trade, manufacturing, tourism, social services, and other key sectors" (Hashem & Ismail, 1998).

In the same year of 1994, the Egyptian domain was divided into three main sub-domains: the academic sub-domain, which is managed by EUN, the commercial sub-domain and the governmental sub-domain, which are served jointly through a partnership between IDSC and RITSEC. Egypt Telecom, which exercises a monopoly on basic

telecommunication services in the country, has been focusing mainly on the provision of a basic communication infrastructure. Another landmark event was the initiative taken by the government, represented by IDSC/RITSEC and Egypt Telecom, in 1996 to establish an open-door policy for commercial Internet services. Through this project, a reasonably priced Internet backbone and gateway facility for private-sector Internet Service Providers (ISPs) were developed (Ahmed Abd El-Menam, Vice President of IDSC, personal communication, 2002). By March of the same year, IDSC/RITSEC licensed 12 ISPs to provide Internet services for the commercial sector and individual users. Services to the public sector, however, remained free of charge (Hashem & Kamel, 1999). Several gateways thus linked Egypt to the Internet: the EUN gateway that serves all Egyptian universities, the American University in Cairo, research institutes and schools; the IDSC/RISTEC gateways that serve governmental entities and ISPs in the country; and international gateways of some ISPs (Figure 2-1).

In October 1996, after a series of negative articles published in the official press claiming that the Internet was being used to spread subversive materials, an official body, the Internet Society of Egypt (ISE), was formed to act as a regulatory body concerning Internet matters. ISE, which is a local chapter of the Internet Society (ISOC), is managed by a board of directors representing the major Internet players in the country. It has been "instrumental in establishing a code of ethics for Internet use, defining ground rules for commercial relationships between ISPs and Telecom Egypt, [and] establishing policies for IDSC with respect to services offered to government departments" (Kelly et al., 2001, p.12). Between early 1997 to mid 1998, the number of Internet users in Egypt increased

Figure 2.1: Internet Gateways in Egypt

Source: Internet Society of Egypt: [http://www.ise.org.eg/gateway.htm]
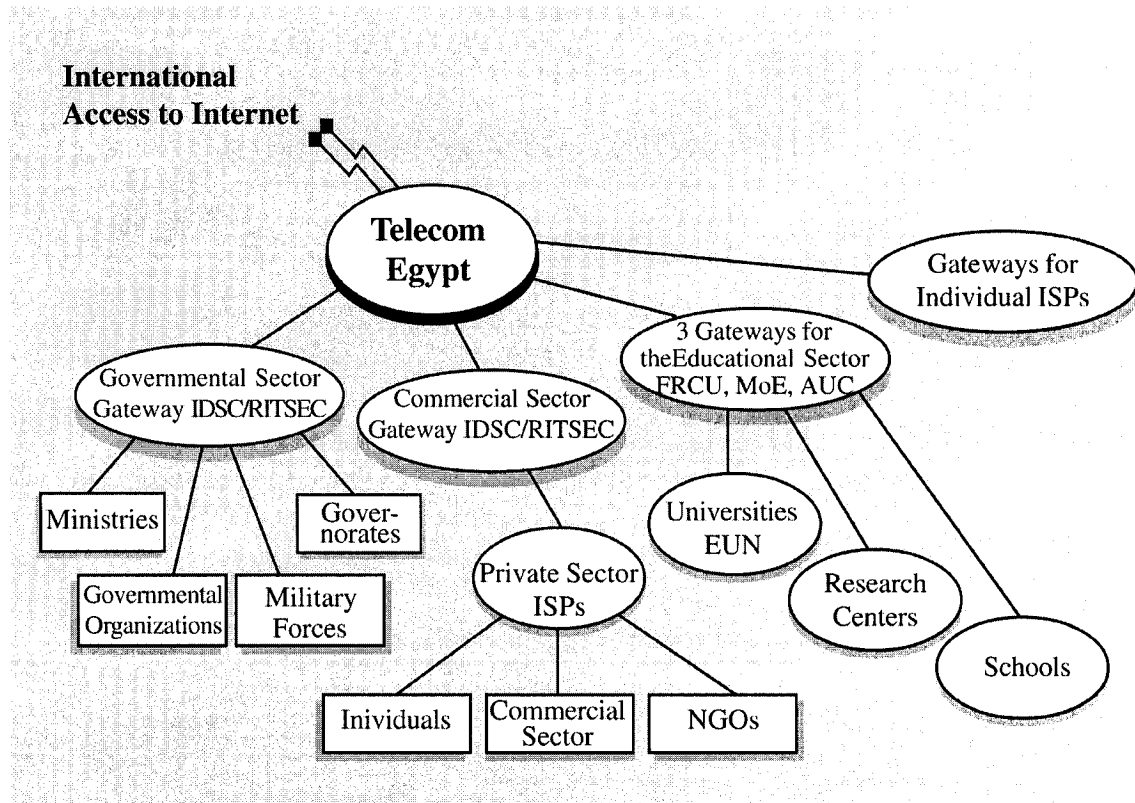
from around 25,000 to around 100,000; the number of ISPs increased from 16 operational ISPs to 40; and the number of cities where users can access Internet at local call rates increased from 4 to 11 (Cairo, Alexandria, Port Said, Tanta, El Mansâra, Râs Gharib, Monofia, Hurghada, Sharm El Sheikh, El Faiyum, El Minya, Asyut, and Aswan) (Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, 2001).

In 2000, the government permitted the private sector to get involved in upgrading the old international bandwidth provided by IDSC, which was no longer sufficient even during off-peak hours. Two private companies, EgyNet and Nile Online, were given contracts to help create the new Internet infrastructure. EgyNet has already completed the first stage of a fiber-optics project to provide a broadband Internet connection of 45 Mbit/s. Eventually, it will build a 210 Mb/s connection to "allow fast Internet access for up to five million subscribers, allowing Egypt to become an Internet gateway for the Arab region" (European Survey of Information Society, 2001). Nile Online, which brings together a number of local and international shareholders, has recently put an advanced network with 45 Mbit/s capacity into operation (Kelly et al., 2001, p. 16). Nile Online also won a governmental contract that allowed the company to build and operate a network for managing data services and Internet access across several governorates. Furthermore, a number of Internet service companies, such as Interpacket, Teleglobe and Zaknet, have started to provide Internet connectivity through satellite technology.

Initially, Internet access in Egypt was expensive for the average Egyptian, costing around US$35 per month in addition to the per-minute charge for the phone call. However, with the reduction of international Internet circuit prices in the second half of the year

2000, the price of Internet bandwidth was cut by 30%, allowing ISPs to reduce Internet subscription fees. In April 2001, the monthly subscription of the Internet was reduced to US$5-10 (European Survey of Information Society, 2001). Additionally, Telecom Egypt, in cooperation with the Ministry of Communications and Information, offers the public direct Internet access through special call numbers. The cost of this access is 5.7 US cents a minute for peak usage and 4.3 US cents a minute for off-peak use. Finally, on January 14, 2002, the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology introduced what it called a "free Internet service" for users in Cairo, with the promise to extend the service to other governorates. This service is not really free but is based on a revenue sharing model between the Internet service providers and Telecom Egypt. In this model, the pre-paid subscription fee is eliminated altogether and the charge for Internet phone calls is reduced and shared between Telecom Egypt and the ISPs. Under this plan the total cost of connecting to the Internet is reduced by as much as 42% for heavy users (Arab Advisors Group, 2001). The Minister of Communications and Information Technology expects that "the free Internet model will result in a boost in the number of Internet users in the country and an increase in the revenues of the Egyptian ISPs" (Al-Ahram, 2001, January 15, p. 23). For high speed Internet access via leased lines, there are a variety of prices depending on whether the customer is a direct client of Telecom Egypt, an ISP, or a client of an ISP. Telecom Egypt provides digital leased lines ranging from 64 kb/s to 512 kb/s for prices from US$240 to $1000 per month. It also provides ISDN Internet access for US$24 per month (Kelly et al., 2001, p. 22).

In order to develop Egyptian content on the Internet, IDSC and RITSEC have jointly launched Egypt's Information Highway Project, which provides a number of pilot web sites, covering tourism, culture, environment, industry, trade, investment, local administrative divisions (governorates), and public services (Hashem & Kamel, 1999). Internet service providers also started to add content. Some ISPs began to differentiate themselves by targeting specific clients, developing information material of interest to their desired market segments. Several official and party newspapers and magazines also began to offer online editions. Some leading non-profit organizations, business associations, economic research institutions, and social and political groups also developed content for Egypt. The year 2000 witnessed the launch of several portals providing information to local citizens as well as the Egyptian diaspora. According to the Internet Software Consortium, Egypt has 10,371 hosts and 294 sub-domains under the top-level domain (.eg) (Internet Software Consortium, 2002).

Currently, there are about 80 operational ISPs, offering a variety of options in their subscription packages. According to the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, the Internet community in Egypt consists of around one million users accessing the Internet at work and home, in universities and cybercafés, and at Information Technology Clubs (which are computer centers created in public libraries, youth centers, and at non-governmental organizations to provide Internet access to the general public at low cost). This translates into a rate of 149 users per 10,000 persons. The number of Internet users is expected to increase substantially in the wake of the "free Internet plan." However, it will probably fall short of the government's goal of reaching

two million users by the end of 2002. The main reasons for this are the high cost of personal computers relative to income levels and the inability of users to access the service in the current stringent economic situation. Generally, while Internet access exists in other urban centers in Egypt, it is much greater in Cairo, than in any other urban center. In this sense, the Internet technology replicates the urban Cairo dominance over media technologies, which was created by the press and broadcasting.

The social construction of the Internet

The Internet is a global communications network that was designed as a technology promoting free communication. It was born, as Castells (2001) puts it, "at the unlikely intersection of big science, military research, and libertarian culture. Major research universities and defense-related think-tanks were essential meeting points between these three sources of the Internet" (2001, p. 17). Originally created to ensure that U.S. Defense Department communication would be possible following a nuclear attack, the Internet was based on a multi-layered, decentralized architecture with a "flat hierarchy, distributed responsibility, on-the-fly connections, speedy and open access that facilitate cooperation and sharing (in contrast to the command-and-control paradigms of computing for managers)" (Anderson, 2000, p. 423). It thus developed as a collaborative tool by engineers and applied scientists who "built into it open access... freedom of information, and, more subtly, notions of transient, purposive connections among people and between pieces of information. Their Internet is organized not so much around transmission as around sharing of information. Their scheme, in turn, diffused to and was

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taken up by the larger world of higher education and allied activities and, subsequently, in

an increasingly commercial communication ecology of business and leisure" (Anderson,

1999a, p. 44).

The Internet culture, which is shaped by the culture of its creators and producers,

according to Castells (2001), is characterized by:

> [A] four-layered structure: the techno-meritocratic culture, the hacker
> culture, the virtual communitarian culture, and the entrepreneurial culture.
> Together they contribute to an ideology of freedom that is widespread in
> the Internet world.... These cultural layers are hierarchically disposed: the
> techno-meritocratic culture becomes specified as a hacker culture by
> building rules and customs into networks of cooperation aimed at
> technological projects. The virtual communitarian culture adds a social
> dimension to technological sharing, by making the Internet a medium of
> selective social interaction and symbolic belonging. The entrepreneurial
> culture works on top of the hacker culture, and on the communitarian
> culture, to diffuse Internet practices in all domains of society by way of
> money-making (2001, p. 37).

The original values built into the Internet, therefore, reflect the significance of free and

open access and the superiority of exchange and participation. The Internet grows "by

adding new uses and new users, who are not only socialized into its culture, but also

expand or extend its repertoire" (Anderson, 2000, p. 423).

Values embodied in Internet technology and its configuration as an interactive,

participatory medium of communication and information—a "pull" technology, in

contrast with the "push" technology of the mass media—have dominated thinking about

the Internet and its impact on the individual and society and ultimately obscured the

social life of the technology and the sociological network of actors that shapes its

development and implementation. As Anderson (2000) notes, "Internet technology...

includes structures, processes, and agents that shape it.... [T]his production, rather than

the consumption, is what shapes environments, use, economics, politics, and the cultural register of the Internet" (2000, p. 420). A more comprehensive conception of Internet technology and its agency in society, therefore, needs to include developers, their activities and the structure of their work, institutions of sponsorship, systems of administration and regulation, the social contexts of use, and the end-users' intentions and efforts to adapt the technology to their values and interests, eventually transforming the technology itself. Thus, although Internet technology is not neutral or value free, as it came to life with built in values, the ultimate consequences of the technology are dependent on social processes. A socio-technical pattern to understand the technological change of the Internet and its social implications thus seems indispensable.

To this end, the conceptual framework proposed by Dutton and Blumler (1989) offers a basic perspective to analyze the social construction of the Internet in Egyptian society. According to this framework, the social implications of new communication media are shaped not only by the potentials of the technology and its new capacities and features, but also by the social setting, which shapes how society responds, interprets and controls technological developments, how different social actors develop and reproduce the technology, how the political and legal frameworks mediate its application, and how people negotiate the new technology. Two main categories, proposed by Dutton and Blumler, are instrumental in examining the complex processes of interaction between the social setting and the technology. These are the national setting and the national communication policy, which together shape the meaning and use of Internet technology.

Four aspects of the national setting mediate and influence the development and the impact of Internet technology in Egypt. These are the organized interests in support or opposition to Internet technology, institutional arrangements governing communications, environmental resources and constraints, and the Egyptian social communication culture (Dutton & Blumler, 1989, pp. 68-69)

I. The strength and interplay of organized interests

Although the first connection to the online world was accomplished through the Egyptian Universities Network, it was not universities that sponsored and spread the Internet in Egypt, but a public-private partnership between the governmental and commercial sectors. Commenting on Internet development, Tarek Kamel, senior advisor of the Minister of Communications and Information Technology states:

> Internet commercialization is a new model for cooperation between the public and private sectors in telecommunication. The government has played a catalytic role in raising awareness as well as deployment of the infrastructure, while the private sector carries value-added services to the end users.... The Internet has opened a window for marketing information services in Egypt to the world.... This has helped in the creation of linkages for the business community in Egypt with the outside world and provides an opportunity to promote tourism, culture, and trade.... The success of the government/private sector partnership in the commercialization of Internet services will push deregulation of other value-added services as well as communication services in the country. The communication infrastructure deployment is a promising area for private sector participation.... Egypt is qualified to play a significant role on the regional level as an Internet gateway to other countries in the region and in Africa (Kamal T., 1997).

With regard to the government, a number of governmental entities are involved in the promotion and development of the Internet. The most influential of them are the

Cabinet of Ministers, represented by the Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC), the Regional Information Technology and Software Engineering Center (RITSEC), Telecom Egypt, and the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology. IDSC was established in 1985 to provide the Egyptian cabinet with information that could be used for supporting the decision-making process in business and socioeconomic development plans (Kamel S., 1997). In the 1990s, IDSC became an integral part of the national managerial and technological development plan, which aimed at building up Egypt's information infrastructure and developing a base for software and hi-tech industries. In 1995, IDSC sponsored and created the "Information Highway" project to promote and develop the use of the Internet in various fields. It also acted as a catalyst to get Egyptian business online by providing free access to the Internet for businesses while arrangements for the private sector to supply services were worked out (Abd El-Menam, personal communication, 2002).

The Regional Information Technology and Software Engineering Center (RITSEC), was established in January 1992 as a joint project between the United Nations Development Program and the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development; and is hosted by the Government of Egypt's Cabinet Information and Decision Support Center. It serves as a regional center for Arab states to accelerate the development of the information technology and software engineering industries. Aside from an extensive training facility, RITSEC hosts a number of major promotional activities such as conferences, seminars, and workshops, that help promote Internet-related applications and

the use of the Internet in socio-economic development and e-commerce. RITSEC also operates an online Trade Information Network.

Telecom Egypt, despite holding a monopoly in most areas of telecommunications in Egypt, is not generally perceived as being a major player in the Internet. However, this is misleading. Telecom Egypt is "the sole provider of domestic and international connectivity and also has shareholdings in several ISPs. In contrast with other countries, where competition in Internet services allowed new market entrants to establish their own international gateways, Telecom Egypt retains its monopoly" (Kelly et al., 2001, p. 20). Recently, however, a number of bandwidth providers have offered links to the Internet via satellite, bypassing Telecom's monopoly over the international gateways. With regard to Internet development, Telecom Egypt has played a major role in establishing an open-door policy for the commercialization of Internet service provision since 1995. Through a franchise model, Telecom Egypt has been actively pursuing joint ventures with other private-sector companies in the fields of data communication and Internet services (American Chamber of Commerce in Egypt, 2002, 13).

The last major governmental actor in Internet development is the newly formed Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (MCIT), which supervises the telecommunications and Internet sectors. Shortly after its inception in October 1999, MCIT developed a national plan for ICT with a special focus on: 1) promoting the national demand for information technology and developing sector projects, 2) enhancing the software export industry, 3) developing human resources and skills, 4) establishing international alliances, 5) modernizing the communications infrastructure, and 6) creating

a proper legislative environment (Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, 2000). This plan is based on a partnership between the public and private sectors. While the ministry intends to fund core projects within the plan, other projects will be funded through the private sector. MCIT also established four working groups to handle the issues of: 1) drafting the new telecommunications law, 2) assessing the current infrastructure and developing an integrated master plan for telecommunications in Egypt, 3) marketing and pricing new telecommunications services and building new business models, and 4) developing human resources in telecommunications and IT (European Survey of Information Society, 2001). An example of the positive outcomes of these group ventures is the restructuring of the Internet pricing policy. Furthermore, a key objective of the telecommunications plan adopted by MCIT is the development of a national network that supports the growth of e-businesses and links Egypt with the world market (Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, 2000).

Three basic interests inform these governmental bodies and motivate their engagement in Internet development. First, they conceive of the Internet as a tool for socio-economic development with the understanding that this modernization will help consolidate popular support for the government. Faced with the typical problems of developing countries, the Egyptian government generally interprets development problems in technological terms, and thus believes that technological systems are the solution to all development problems that have plagued the country. The government assumes that information and communication technologies will generate development regardless of political and socioeconomic conditions. The discourse put forth by many

government officials echoes the rhetoric of such institutions as the World Bank and the International Telecommunication Union, which advocate the dominant neoliberal paradigm of development: that new digital technologies, neutral and transferable from one context to another, will drive positive social change. Thus, the development of the Internet has been instigated by the promise to offer an information and communication architecture supportive of development processes. For example, Egypt's "information highway project," sponsored and implemented by IDSC, has been promoted as a powerful instrument in realizing targeted development. It will create a positive environment for "the dissemination and exchange of information among various stakeholders in sustainable development processes... [and provide] a cost-effective vehicle for electronic dissemination of information to geographically dispersed and widely diversified audiences to help the modernization process" (Kamel S., 1997).

Second, the Internet is viewed as an opportunity for private sector growth and expansion of the market economy in Egypt. It promises to transform business transactions, providing a global network of suppliers, consultants and customers, and establishing a decentralized market place. It thus functions as a business tool accessible by individuals as well as various types of private enterprises with small, medium and large scales of operations. "A business environment operating within a global environment... [would] have direct implications on providing networking, increased and improved productivity, realizing information sharing across different private organizations... and pooling additional international business opportunities" (Kamel S., 1997). Internet technology thus facilitates a broader reach for individual companies. Additionally, as

Ahmed Nazif, the Minster of Communication and Information argues, "ICT will bring the country into a more competitive position in regional and global markets.... The growth of the information-based economy will eventually attract cross-national business corporations to the Egyptian market" (Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, 2000). The Internet is thus promoted as a "catalyst" for private sector development and as a means for attracting transnational corporations, whose operations would have a positive impact on the Egyptian economy.

Third, information and communication technologies, particularly the Internet, are also seen as a unique opportunity to "leapfrog" into the Information Age and to catch up with the "advanced" world. Believing that the domination of Western countries was a result of Egypt's missing the industrial revolution, the current government considers information technology the new revolution it must not miss. The idea is that the information superhighway will magically transform Egypt into a knowledge-based society on a par with Western countries. This is a widely held belief in government circles. For instance, Rafat Radwan, chairman of the IDSC, underlines the Internet's importance in "closing the digital gap" and in achieving a "technological leap" that will help the country catch up with the West that surpassed and suppressed the Middle East in the industrial period (Radwan, 2000, 173). Many officials echo the same argument, citing ostensibly persuasive statistics to substantiate this vision. Additionally, the Internet is regarded as a contested field in which Egypt should enjoy supremacy vis-à-vis other Arab countries. "As a leader of mass media and the film industry in the region," the Minister of Communications and Information states, "Egypt should dominate this new communication

medium and serve as a gateway for all Arab countries. In the age of global communication, Egypt should command information technologies and serve as a center for IT and telecommunications to keep its pioneering role in the Arab region" (The Future of The Internet in Egypt, 2001, July 21, p. 13).

On the other hand, with the commercialization of Internet services in 1996, an increasing number of ISP companies have played a major role in spreading the Internet. The largest and most influential of these companies are LINKdotNET, GegaNet, and Internet Egypt. Although ISPs are reluctant to divulge their numbers of subscribers, it is safe to say that these three ISPs hold the lion's share of the market. A newcomer on the Egyptian Internet scene is Nile Online, which was recently granted a license to operate a commercial Internet backbone in Egypt. Nile Online is owned by Telecom Egypt and other investors. These private-sector ISPs have been motivated first and foremost by the goal of generating profits through Internet technology. To this end, they expand the commodification of the Internet supporting its use for business and e-commerce, which allows them to enlarge their market, providing a wide range of networking solutions, e-applications and Internet services to corporations and private businesses. Through their partnership with the government, ISPs have deliberately created openings for e-business.

The major Internet providers are in fact part of, or have very strong ties with, wider business networks; some of them are even cross-owned. Their ownership includes both business people experimenting with the new medium and some higher-level officials. Most of the business people are more interested in developing business via the Internet than in developing the Internet itself. They have emerged as a powerful lobbying

force, which has been increasingly capable of competing with governmental bodies in writing national Internet policy. This, in part, explains why e-commerce development occupies the core of Internet policy in Egypt, while Internet use for socio-cultural development has now become merely a symbolic gesture. The alliance between the government and the private sector has led to the construction of the Internet as a tool "just for business." While such a commercial use of the Internet is a global trend, in the Western countries, it is often balanced by other educational and socio-cultural uses, which is not the case in Egypt. Furthermore, as ISPs have strategically positioned themselves in business centers in Egypt (e.g. Cairo and Alexandria), other urban centers, which have sufficient telecommunications infrastructures, remain limited in Internet connectivity, and many of them have to pay extra for long distance Internet calls.

This tendency toward commercialization has shaped the social construction of the Internet by governmental entities and entrepreneurs, and is supported by two other actors: the Internet Society of Egypt (ISE) and the official newspapers. The ISE, whose governing board is a group of governmental technocrats and major ISPs, normally promotes the Internet as an e-commerce environment with the promise of borderless marketing and trade. In this respect, ISE established an E-commerce Committee (ISE/E2C) as early as 1997 to lobby various government representatives and banking professionals to promote Egyptian business and governmental e-commerce awareness (El-Nawawy & Ismail, 1999). According to Sherif Hashem a member of the ISE board of directors and Magda Ismail, the chief of the e-commerce committee,

> E-commerce as a medium for foreign trade is also a catalyst for export....
> It will aid in curtailing national debt and inflation rates and in increasing

the gross national product. E-commerce may help create many high-paying jobs and new businesses: an Egyptian entrepreneur will have the opportunity to venture and establish a small, medium or even micro-size enterprise with global market access; an Egyptian software developer can work from home and write software for international customers; and a maker of oriental rugs or artifacts can export to new markets from his small business in a remote village. Additionally, many new issues, unique to e-commerce itself, will create working opportunities for professionals in many fields, e.g. in legal, financial, and computer fields (Hashem & Ismail, 1998).

Official newspapers have reproduced the government discourse on the Internet, combining a highly optimistic rhetoric concerning technological development with a fear of international competition and "falling behind." In many articles, the Internet is portrayed as the epitome of the "global village" with speedy transactions, limitless information access and strong economic competition (e.g. *Al-Ahram*, 2000, March 21, p. 12). Other articles present the neoliberal argument of "developed" and "developing" countries, and the need to catch up by deploying telecommunication technologies and the Internet (e.g. *Al-Gumhoria*, 1999, July 3, p. 9). Other papers publicize electronic commerce and its positive impact on the economy (e.g. *Al-Akhbar*, 1999, May 16, p. 8).

In short, business and economic potentials are the major driving force behind Internet development in Egypt and the chief perspective through which Internet usefulness has been constructed. However, as Raymond Williams (1975) argues, social forces "set limits and exert pressures, but neither wholly control nor wholly predict the outcome," (1975, p. 130). Among the first beneficiaries of the Internet in Egypt have been journalists and the press. With the spread of the Internet, a growing number of journalists have come to realize the potential the Internet offers for collecting and reporting information. Many journalists, particularly in party and independent newspapers, use the

Internet to get international reports about Egypt and the Arab World. For instance, *Al-Shaab* newspaper published a CIA report on weapons of mass destruction in Arab and Islamic countries. The independent *Al-Osboa* newspaper published the Human Rights Watch's reports on Egypt (Ibrahim, 1999b, p. 123). These uses publicized the importance of the Internet as a source for news and information not only in journalists' circles, but also among the readers who started to view the Internet as a medium for news unavailable otherwise.

The use of the online news medium is further supported by the enormous increase of Arabic news sites. Taking advantage of the Internet as a medium for electronic publishing, major Egyptian newspapers and magazines have established their respective news sites. In addition, several purely online news sources and Internet portals have been established. According to Michael Hudson (2001), more than 50 Arab portals, operating in Arabic as well as (or instead of) English were developed in the first years of Internet use in the Arab World. The increasing presence of online news sources—including Egyptian press (at present, there are more than 35 newspapers and magazines online), Arab media (including pan-Arab newspapers published in London and Paris), foreign Arabic news services (such as Arabic BBC and Arabic CNN), and Arab and Egyptian news agencies, as well as a seemingly infinite number of foreign media and world news agencies—has constructed the Internet as an open and significant medium for news and information. Some of these online news sources escape bans in Egypt. For instance, the Labor party newspaper, *Al-Shaab*, which has been forced to cease publication, continues to publish on the Internet. *Al-Shaab* online site, which is updated twice a week, has

rapidly become one of the busiest Egyptian news sites, receiving 224,000 visits per week (Ibrahim, 1999b, p. 128). Other sites of foreign newspapers, which are censored and have some of their materials cut to enter the Egyptian market, are available in their entirety online, free of any censorship. Others still can only be accessed on the Internet, with no presence outside the computer networks. This free and comprehensive news environment constructs different functions for and conceptions of the Internet in Egyptian society.

At another level, users have appropriated Internet technology for new cultural and communicative practices, adding different uses to what is meant to be a medium for business. "Facilitating the flow of financial information, transactions, and tracking that add up to 'electronic commerce' also facilitates the flow of cultural (including political) content around barriers previously erected" (Anderson, 1999b). While less able to construct the technology according to their interests, different social and political groups, as well as civil society organizations, have brought other values and interests to the social-shaping processes of the Internet. These actors use the Internet as a source for news, a voice of Egyptian identity, a forum for free expression at a time when restrictions on such freedoms are prevalent, and, most importantly, as a space to present their own activities and views and to link up with other users across the country and across the globe. Human rights organizations and activists use the Internet very effectively to overcome their limited resources and limited access to government media. As a technological device that allows two computers in a system to exchange data via electronic mail (e-mail), and through the World Wide Web, newsgroups (electronic "bulletin boards"), file transfers, and real time "chat rooms," the Internet is perceived by

them as a convenient tool for the dissemination of information and for engagement in public debates on social and political issues. All these uses "enculturate" the Internet with values other than the economic ones.

II. Institutional arrangements

Institutional arrangements mainly concern the administrative and regulatory arrangements that have been set up to govern the Internet. In Egypt, as we have seen, responsibility for Internet planning, policy and regulation is carried out by a number of organizations, including the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (MCIT), the Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC), the Information Society of Egypt (ISE), the Supreme Council of Universities, the incumbent telecommunications operator, Telecom Egypt, and the Telecommunications Regulatory Board (TRB). As in many other countries, telecommunication is a state-controlled monopoly, promoted as a public service, and regulated by a government ministry, originally the Ministry of Transport and Telecommunications, and, now, the newly formed Ministry of Communications and Information Technology. Telecom Egypt is the sole provider of domestic and international telecommunication networks and services. Recently however, the telecommunications sector has undergone certain changes. In particular, Telecom Egypt has been changed from a public authority to a profitable joint-stock company to make it ready for a gradual privatization process. The separation of regulatory and operational functions has taken place through the creation of an independent regulator, the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA). And, more importantly, the

markets for some telecommunications services, including the provision of Internet services to end users, have been privatized.

In the beginning, the IDSC, in cooperation with Telecom Egypt, was responsible for Internet policy and regulations. At present, however, the MCIT plays a central role in national policy-making for the telecommunications sector. The TRA is responsible for licensing and supervising telecom operators and Internet service providers, as well as for regulating the pricing and standards of services and for implementing the national ICT policy (Kamel, 2001). The MCIT has developed a more unified and centrally directed approach to telecommunications policy. Yet there are a number of actors that must be consulted and coordinated to develop and move this central effort forward. With regard to the Internet, the MCIT works closely with both the community of Internet service providers and the ISE. The perceived importance of the Internet to economic activities and international trade, has invited new policy elites into the Internet policy arena. In this respect, a National E-commerce Committee under the Ministry of Economy and International Trade was founded in early 1999. This committee is responsible for lobbying government ministries and critical decision-makers to gain support for an electronic commerce initiative and for developing a national e-commerce action plan (El-Nawawy & Ismail, 1999).

Additionally, a new alliance has been established between MCIT, the Ministry of Economy and International Trade, investor associations and other organizations involved in foreign trade to formulate a national e-commerce policy. A legal committee from various government ministries and legal entities is now drafting the new e-commerce law.

For managing Internet domains, the Supreme Council of Universities is the official administrator for Egypt's top-level domain name (.EG). There are seven second level domains: .com.eg (for business), .net.eg (for ISPs), .eun.eg (for the Egyptian Universities Network), .edu.eg (for other academic institutions), .sci.eg (for scientific organizations), .gov.eg (for government) and .org.eg (for nonprofit organizations). Responsibility for registering domains is split between EUN and IDSC (Gamal Ali, Manager of EUN, personal communication, 2002).

This growing array of actors responsible for Internet policy and regulations has led to some confusion about their exact duties and responsibilities. The fact that the whole telecommunication sector in Egypt is in the midst of transition—with a new national telecommunication law being worked out and several, sometimes conflicting, policy-formation and planning groups being established—further blurs the issues of responsibility for Internet policy. It is worth noting that local authorities are not involved in Internet technology arrangements. This can be explained in the light of the legacy of government centralized planning and the need to coordinate the telecommunications infrastructure on a national scale.

III. Environmental Resources and Constraints

Environmental resources and constraints, according to Dutton and Blumler (1989), refer to the human, physical, and technological environments that either make the Internet more valuable and feasible or impose constraints on its development. The size and wealth of the domestic market, the nature of the existing telecommunications

infrastructure, and a nation's orientation to its international environment are the major factors that affect Internet development (1989, p. 74). Although Egypt represents a sizable market for Internet technology in terms of its 67 million population and its large size, there are many factors which diminish this market. The high illiteracy rate (45% of the total population) and the high rate of computer illiteracy among the educated act as barriers to entry for the end user. Furthermore, while the market price for a personal computer purchased in Egypt is not significantly higher than the world market price, the low individual income makes it difficult for a large segment of the population to obtain a PC. Without such an initial investment in hardware, access to the Internet is severely curtailed. In fact, affordability is a critical issue in Egypt, where one fifth of the population lives below the poverty line. While "cybercafés" and IT Clubs provide a solution to this problem, these resources exist only in major metropolitan areas. According to *Masrawy,* an Egyptian Internet gate, there are 155 cybercafés in Egypt; most of them (124 cafés) are located in Cairo and Alexandria, while the rest are dispersed in the major cities of some governorates. To overcome these cost limitations a locally produced hardware industry could be set up to expand the computer and Internet market. Yet this requires large investments, which exceed the entrepreneurial capabilities of most actors in the private sector, which currently assumes the major responsibility for Internet diffusion in Egypt. Unlike large corporate actors in North America and Europe, Egyptian entrepreneurs do not have the resources to allow them to venture into the hardware industry. A trained workforce with technological skills and expertise is also a problem. Thus, despite the remarkable growth in Internet users over the last seven years (from few thousands to

one million), the percentage of Internet users (less than 2% of the overall population) remains very small.

Similarly, while both the government and the private sector have engaged in an impressive array of initiatives to promote the Internet as a tool for business and e-commerce, the conservative and bureaucratic financial practices of the public sector, which constitutes the backbone of Egypt's economy, remain an obstacle. This is particularly true of the banking and financial sectors; they are unenthusiastic about participation in e-commerce and concerned about the security of Internet transactions (Kamel, 2001). In addition, there are a number of barriers that constrain the use of the Internet for e-commerce. Key among them are: lack of awareness at the individual, the corporate, and the governmental levels; the lack of an e-commerce infrastructure (e.g. Certificate Authority and Secure Electronic Transaction Protocol); the limited telecommunication infrastructure; the lack of financial services and infrastructure (such as Credit Cards and Electronic Transaction); the lack of a legislative environment to govern and regulate e-commerce activities; and finally, lack of coordination between the ministries, the public sector, and the governmental entities involved in the regulation of the field (El-Nawawy & Ismail, 1999). Although the government is working now to eliminate these barriers, until it does so, the number of public-sector and corporate users will remain limited.

Compared to most Middle Eastern and North African countries, Egypt has a relatively strong telecommunications infrastructure. Over the last decade, Egypt's telecommunications network has been greatly improved, particularly after the establishment

of the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, which adopted an ambitious plan to add one million lines annually (from 1999 to 2002) to meet the customer demands for residential and business areas. At present, telephone density is about 10 percent (6.6 million lines) and almost 100 percent of subscriber lines are digital (Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, 2002, p. 8). Internet connectivity, according to Ahmed Al-Sherbini, manager of the National Institute of Telecommunication, has been drastically improved through the provision of expanded digital access. Through a partnership between the government and the private sector, a number of digital multiplexers were set up in various public switches across Greater Cairo, constituting the first digital backbone for data communication in the country. Furthermore, since Internet access in rural areas suffers from the lack of a terrestrial telecommunications infrastructure, a pilot network of very small aperture terminals (VSATs) has been deployed to connect six information centers in rural governorates to the Internet (Al-Sherbini, personal communication, 2002).

The growth in Internet connectivity is expected to continue, especially through the use of Egyptian satellites, Nile Sat 101 and 102, which are equipped with Internet and IT facilities that support digital connectivity and provide easy access to remote and rural areas. These satellites can support high-speed Internet services to end users, improving the quality of services and providing quick access to multimedia content (State Information Service, 2001, p. 277). Recently, TRA has licensed several new companies to build and operate an Internet backbone, data provision systems and frame relay gateways.

These developments have improved Internet services and increased their bandwidth capacity to 400 million Mbit/s.

International connectivity is assured through hybrid connectivity links involving satellites and fiber optic cables. As a member of ARABSAT, INTELSAT, and INMARSAT, Egypt uses satellite communications extensively, with some nine earth stations in operation" (Al-Sherbini, personal communication, 2002). Submarine cables link Egypt to Europe and North America provide reliable Internet connections to Egypt, which also participates in the FLAG Telecom global city-to-city network connecting Egypt to Europe and Japan via two landing points located in Alexandria and Suez. At a regional level, there are fiber optic links to Syria, Lebanon, Italy and Greece (Blal, 2000, p. 23). In the final analysis, however, the current status of the telecommunications infrastructure, although it is improving, cannot support a wide spread of the Internet, particularly outside Cairo and major urban centers. The reason for this lies in the ratio of telephone lines to the overall population, which is still low at 10 phones per 100 users and manifests great imbalances between urban and rural areas. For instance, while the ratio in Cairo is 28 phones per 100 individuals, there are less than five phones per 100 individuals in all rural areas in Southern Egypt (Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, 2002, p.23).

With regard to Egypt's orientation to its international environment, the geo-political positioning of Egypt places it right at the heart of the Middle East, linking the African and Asian continents. Furthermore, it has historically played a political leadership role vis-à-vis the other Arab countries, which occupy 8% of world's surface (fourth in

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regard to area) and comprise a population of about 300 million Arabs or 3.5% of the world population. In addition, its status as the chief center of Arab media and culture combine to make Egypt's international situation a unique environmental resource (Shakroush et al., 1999, p. 25). This situation makes Egypt more open to international developments and trends. It also encourages the expansion of its Internet market initiatives to cover all the Arab countries that share a common culture and language. In the ICT domain, Egypt is actively seeking to establish itself as the dominant player in the Arab region. It is starting to emerge as "a regional software hub with some 80% of software exports destined to other Arab countries" (Kelly et al., 2001, pp. 9-10). Likewise, easy access to the Arab market makes Egyptian Internet service companies regional operators (e.g. LinkdotNet, EgyNet and NOL). To a great extent, therefore, Egypt's strategic geographic and cultural position is supportive for the country's Internet development, which is envisioned as the path to maintain Egypt's regional supremacy as well as its competitive role in providing telecommunication services.

IV. Communication Culture

What Dutton and Blumler (1989) call a country's communication culture is particularly difficult to determine for Egypt. On the one hand, Egyptians are very interested in traditional mass media, particularly TV. Many studies indicate that the state-controlled television is the preferred medium and is widely watched for its entertainment programs and drama. With regard to the press, the governmental newspapers enjoy a wide circulation and virtually dominate the press market. However, the trust in these official

media is minimal. As Al-Tarabishi (2000) stresses, Egyptians' dependency on traditional mass media does not indicate a high level of trust in them; rather, it can be explained in terms of the limited alternatives offered to the audience and the deeply rooted daily media habits of the population (2000, p. 26). The state control of broadcast media and major newspapers leads to a singular hegemonic discourse, presenting the views and interpretations of the political elites, while ignoring the everyday life experiences of common citizens. The "mirror effect" of these media—that is, all of them show deep similarity of information and repeat the same discourse and representations—broadens the distance between the audience and the government media. As a result, citizens place more trust in face-to-face and unofficial means of communication. Interestingly, the Internet is viewed as one of these unofficial information sources that defy state control. It is thus regarded positively by many individuals, as well as by social and political groups and organizations, as an alternative and reliable information source.

In contrast to this information openness, Egyptian society is culturally defensive. Religious beliefs, social traditions, and moral values are major issues of concern for Egyptians who are "proud of [their] enduring cultural legacy preserved through the use of the Arabic language" (Amin & Napoli, 2000, p. 185). Out of these concerns, new information and communication media, such as satellite television and the Internet, which are imbued with Western values and dominated by foreign languages, are often viewed as a potential threat to Egyptian cultural identity. A large number of Egyptians are concerned about the subversive potential of materials transmitted by the new media, and fear their negative effects on religious and moral values, particularly among Egyptian

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youth. Others argue that these new media pose certain dangers of Western domination and of cultural homogenization (Ghreeb, 2000, p. 397). As a result, the potential for Internet diffusion is more limited than it might initially appear. However, the current increase of Arabic content on the Internet might "domesticate" the medium, alleviating the concerns of Egyptians who regard it as a threat to the Arabic language and culture, and Islamic religion.

At another level, socio-political communication is of great importance to the Egyptian government. Unlike North American and European countries that consider communication as a commodity, or as a source of developing an open and participatory democratic society, communication in Egypt is a tool for serving powerful government interests. The state views communications not as a public good, but as a dangerous instrument that must be strictly regulated and controlled. Since the first years of the 1952 revolution, the political regime has sought to harness the media to establish and maintain its power. The regime has also extended its control to new communications media (e.g. TV), thus dominating all the means of information dissemination. While monopoly control over the media has been lessened over the last two decades as political parties and some independent entities have gained access to the press and satellite broadcasting, the state has not surrendered its tight hold on the most widespread media, nor abandoned its desire to control the new ones. Nevertheless, the government, driven by the promise of information-led economic development, permits the Internet an exceptional status. As Ramsey Kamel (2001) points out, the Egyptian government is "caught in a conundrum, encouraging the Internet for economic development and therefore adopting a

positive/tolerant position towards it, even though it poses a threat as an unregulated information flow" (2001).

In this context, many political groups and civil society organizations, which have no access to the mass media, view the Internet as an open and powerful medium through which they can spread news and information and communicate their opinions and views. At the individual level, the availability of the Internet constitutes for Egyptian users an influential source of information that alters their dependence on the official media, and puts them in a closer touch with world political, cultural, and social trends in an unfettered milieu. As much of Egyptian life consists of searching for information typically through social networks of trust and mutual obligation, these habits will extend to the Internet, where they will be magnified to international scales. The different, sometimes contradictory, aspects of communication culture thus deeply affect the meaning, use, and social role of the Internet in Egyptian society.

Conclusion: Toward a National Communication Policy for the Internet

Dutton and Blumler (1989) identify communication policy along normative, legal and behavioral lines. Normatively, policy defines "ideals and goals, which are the target of public policy. Legally, policy is manifested in specific laws, regulations, programs... established by relevant governmental authorities. Behaviorally, policy is reflected in actual patterns of action." (1989, p. 79). With the establishment of the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, a new telecommunications policy was announced, emphasizing the development of infrastructure and services in accordance

with world standards and the enhancement of access to telecommunication networks, the Internet, and telephone systems throughout Egypt. Other normative principles of this policy include promoting the usage of new information systems in all government and society sectors to serve development needs, building an information-based society capable of absorbing and benefiting from the new technology infrastructure, and creating a deregulated environment that invites private investment, competition, and transparency. From a legal and a behavioral perspective, however, the actual development of the Internet and the relevant laws and regulations in place are not supportive of the normative principles.

To evaluate the national communication policy and its impact on the social shaping of the Internet, Dutton and Blumler (1989) propose three criteria: the scale and quality of developments; the locus of control over the conduits and content of communications; and the priority given to competing values in the development and implementation of communication technologies (1989, p. 80). With regard to the scale and quality of Internet developments, it is clear that Egypt has made remarkable progress in telecommunication and Internet connectivity in the past three years.

Table 2.3: Telecommunication and Internet Connectivity Developments
1999-2001

Indicator	October 1999	October 2001	Proportion
Total Exchange Capacity	6,400,000	8,400,000	31%
Fixed Phone Subscriber	4,900,000	6,600,000	35%
Waiting List	1,265,000	750,000	-40%

Rural Telecommunication	755 Switches in rural areas	970 Switches in rural areas	25%
Mobile Subscription	654,014	3,270,000	399%
International Circuits	6,130	10,535	72%
ISDN Subscribers	919	1755	91%
International Internet Bandwidth	20 Mbit/s	400 Mbit/s	1900%
Number of IT Clubs	30	175	483%
Internet Users	300,000	1,000,000	300%

Source: The Ministry of Communication and Information Technology

As Table 1.3 shows, between 1999 and 2001, the total number of fixed phone lines increased by 35% (from 4,900,000 to 6,600,000 lines). The total exchange capacity and the number of switches in rural areas also increased, although the density of phone lines in the rural areas is still very low. Internet bandwidth has witnessed a dramatic growth from 20 mega bites per second to 400 mega bites. The number of information technology clubs that provide Internet connection to the public, among other services, has also increased substantially. However, these developments in infrastructure largely support the expansion of Internet services only in major cities, particularly in Cairo and Alexandria.

Furthermore, Internet use in the business sector is widely facilitated at the expense of its use in other sectors. Many initiatives and projects have been undertaken to promote e-commerce. As well, a number of government committees are now working out e-commerce related issues, such as regulations and laws, telecommunications infrastructure, encryption and payment security, procedures for establishing e-commerce companies, incentive

programs for small and medium enterprises, and public awareness (Kelly et al., 2001, p. 36). Furthermore, the government has recently introduced the "Smart Village" initiative to build several ICT business parks near major metropolitan centers in Egypt. These villages are designed to promote software industry, e-commerce, and information services for business people (Amr Hashem, personal communication, 2002).

Outside the business sector, Internet developments are limited. For instance, in the educational sector, connectivity at primary and secondary schools is very poor. Only 18% of the total 32,000 schools are equipped with Internet connectivity; and in 90% of these Internet-connected schools, there is only a single computer installed. Only three schools have web sites (European Survey of Information Society, 2001). The Egyptian Universities Network (EUN), that connects all Egyptian universities—Cairo, Ain Shams, Alexandria, Helwan, Mansoura, Zagazig, Tanta, Menoufia, Suez Canal, Menia, Assiut, and Al-Azhar, as well as the American University in Cairo—and research centers to the Internet, limits its individual services to university staff and postgraduate students. Currently, EUN serves only 4,000 subscribers (Gamal Ali, personal communication, 2002). In the medical sector, less than 10% of Egypt's hospitals and clinics have Internet access, and only five out of 3,914 have an online presence (European Survey of Information Society, 2001). In the governmental sector, in spite of the MCIT and IDSC efforts to bring the government online, the Internet has not gained in popularity. Twelve of the 34 national ministries have web sites, and many of these sites present their content only in English. While there are numerous web sites that promote foreign investment and tourism in Egypt, many government sectors are underrepresented.

The actual development of the Internet somewhat seems to contradict the objectives of Egypt's communication policy. To achieve the goals outlined in this policy, Internet services should be expanded on a non-discriminatory basis. For instance, telecommunication infrastructure should be implemented in a way that supports Internet use throughout the country, and not only in major urban centers. Internet access at a local call rate (what the MCIT called "the free Internet model") should be nationally available, regardless of an ISP's point of presence. Further, public access centers and cybercafés should be promoted on a large scale in small cities and rural areas. Likewise, to encourage an information-based society, more government entities should actively participate in the use and development of the Internet. More government data should be available in the public domain through the Internet and other communications media. In fact, the current developments of the Internet call for commercial technologies to be used exclusively for the economic and business sectors.

With regard to control over the Internet, the government has pursued a mixed strategy. On the infrastructure level, Telecom Egypt enjoys full monopoly and a centralized control over the provision and regulation of basic domestic and international telecommunications services. The current legislation does not allow the production and commercial exploitation of alternative telecommunications networks. However, the government has permitted competition and decentralized control over the provision of value-added services, encouraging the private sector to provide Internet services to the end users. Yet it retains control over the regulation of the services provided by the private sector through the Telecommunication Regulatory Authority, which is a state-controlled

agency, not an independent regulator. The government control over the conduit of Internet communications thus contradicts the principles of current Internet policy, which envisions a more deregulated telecommunications environment in which services are liberalized and private companies are permitted to construct and provide their own international Internet connectivity. Other developments in the telecommunications sector do not appear to be moving in the direction of liberalization. For example, the MCIT has delayed the gradual privatization of Telecom Egypt to 2005, although it had previously announced that this process would start by the year 2000; ISPs are denied direct access to international undersea cables; and, the use of satellite connectivity is restricted to certain ISPs (Kelly et al., 2001, p.44).

On the other hand, the government has not made any efforts to control online content. It has not used any technological devices (such as proxy servers) to interpose between the end-user and the Internet in order to filter and block content. There are no laws specifically regulating online speech (Human Rights Watch, 1999). All individuals, organizations and corporations are permitted to establish accounts with Internet Service Providers; and, no approval from a government agency is required before an individual, organization or corporation posts a website. As well, ISPs are not required to submit information about the identities of Internet subscribers or about the nature of their Internet activities. No record is kept of users in cybercafés or the pattern of their uses. The only effort to regulate Internet content was undertaken by the "Internet Society of Egypt," which issued a Code of Ethics, advising Internet users "to refrain from all abusive uses of Internet resources that might endanger the public... or that might affect or conflict with

Egyptian traditional values, ethics, religion, or national welfare... and to avoid harming others, their property, [or] reputation" (Internet Society of Egypt, 1997b).

As this chapter has demonstrated, the Internet is valued and promoted as a tool for social and economic development, as an opportunity for private sector growth, and as a means for catching up with the Western countries. It is viewed as a path to the "Information Age" in which Egypt will be transformed into a knowledge-based society. Among these competing values and uses, the economic and business focus has gained the upper hand. Strengthening the Egyptian economy and expanding the private sector are the driving forces, which underlie Internet development. It appears that the pro-Internet elites in government and the private sector have been successful in developing the Internet as a business tool. Broad social objectives, such as serving the social, educational, and cultural needs recede or are altogether excluded from this form of Internet development. The for-profit model of Internet expansion, which largely focuses on its commercial utility and thus displays commercial values, does not place a high value on the spread of public access, nor does it support educational or cultural uses of the Internet.

Chapter 3

The Internet as a News Medium:
Al-Ahram and Al-Wafd Online Services

In much of the literature on new media, the Internet is depicted as a unique

medium, one that either signals a radical departure from existing forms of communication,

or represents the ultimate convergence of all human communication media. In both cases, a

number of hyperbolic claims come to dominate the discourse, obscuring the real nature of

the Internet and its interplay with other media. Both extremes—the total separation from

other media and the seamless merge of telecommunication, computing, and traditional

media—do not help us understand the Internet as a medium, let alone identify the

challenges it poses to the print and broadcasting media. To better understand the Internet

and its function as a news medium, this chapter tries to avoid such misconceptions. By

using Bolter and Grusin (1999) theory of "remediation," the specificity of the online

medium, its identifying characteristics and its similarities to and differences from other

news media will be revealed.

The chapter will then investigate how the Internet news medium is conceived and

used by two Egyptian news organizations, *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd*. Data for this section

came from interviews with online journalists in the two news organizations. These

interviews focus on the online journalists' conceptions of the Internet as a news medium,

their definitions of the distinct features of online news, and their interpretations of the differences between the online and print publishing. The interviews also explore the process of constructing the audience for the two online news sites. The institutional image of the online audience and the ideas and assumptions of the two organizations about the news interests of their audiences are thus examined. Finally, the interviews investigate how online news is produced in the two sites and how the gate-keeping process operates by exploring the daily work routines and practices, organizational policies and constraints, and online editors' practices and values.

New Medium, New Remediation Strategies

In *Understanding Media* (1964), Marshall McLuhan notes that "the 'content' of any medium is always another medium. The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph" (1964, p. 8). McLuhan's argument suggests that new media are not completely new phenomena. In fact, they grow out of old media through complex processes of "repurposing" and "incorporation." Bolter and Grusin (1999) call that process—representing one medium in the form of another—"remediation." They argue that "remediation is a defining characteristic of the new digital media" (1999, p. 45).

In this sense, Bolter and Grusin (1999) identify a new medium as that which remediates: "...it is that which appropriates the techniques, forms, and social significance of other media and attempts to rival or refashion them.... [A new] medium can never operate in isolation, because it must enter into relationships of respect and rivalry with

other media" (1999, p. 78). While some media critics believe that new media cannot be significant until they make a radical break with the past, Bolter and Grusin (1999) disagree, contending that "[new] media can never reach this state of transcendence, but will instead function in a constant dialectic with earlier media" (1999, p. 50). Accordingly, they argue that:

> The Internet, as a communications system and as a cultural symbol, remediates the telegraph. We still picture the Internet as a reticule of electric lines covering the industrialized world, as the telegraph first did in the nineteenth century, even though the Internet today consists of a variety of data links, including lines above ground, buried cables, and microwave and satellite links. Prior to the World Wide Web, the services of the Internet (such as email and simple file transfer) refashioned principally alphabetic media (the book, the letter, the technical report)... And because the Internet could not pretend to offer the range of materials available in print, it had to rely on speed of communication as the only advantage in its remediation. This speed was most telling in electronic mail, by far the most popular use of the Internet even into the early 1990s. In its obscure first years, the Web too remediated only textual communication. [With the creation of the] graphical browser, ... the World Wide Web could now refashion a larger class of earlier media. In addition to the letter and the scientific report, it could now remediate the magazine, the newspaper, and graphic advertising. Internet magazines and news services became popular and important genres (Bolter and Grusin, 1999, pp. 197-198).

The Internet as a news medium is thus an explicit act of remediation, importing earlier news media (e.g. newspapers, magazines, radio, and television) into a digital space. Remediation, however, does not mean a simple act of borrowing in which one medium takes over the properties of the others. Instead, remediation involves a process of reforming or improving on predecessors. While McLuhan views this reform in terms of change in "scale or pace or pattern that [the new medium] introduces into human affairs" (1964, p. 8), Bolter and Grusin (1999) argue that:

Each new medium is justified because it fills a lack or repairs a fault in its predecessor, because it fulfills the unkept promise of an older medium.... The supposed virtue of virtual reality, of videoconferencing and interactive television, and of the World Wide Web is that each of these technologies repairs the inadequacy of [earlier] medium or media.... In each case that inadequacy is represented as a lack of immediacy, and this seems to be generally true in the history of remediation. Photography was supposedly more immediate than painting, film than photography, [and] television than film.... The rhetoric of remediation favors immediacy and transparency, even though as the medium matures it offers new opportunities for hypermediacy (1999, p. 60).

Therefore, while the Internet functions as a remediator, it strives to overcome and refashion older media. In fact, what is new about the Internet as a news medium lies in its particular strategies for remediation, which are "both what is unique to [the Internet world] and what denies the possibility of that uniqueness" (Bolter and Grusin, 1999, p. 50). In the course of representing news media, the Internet deploys what Bolter and Grusin (1999) call the twin logics of remediation: "immediacy" and "hypermediacy" in strategic ways to introduce itself as an improved version of these media (1999, p. 5). In fact, both immediacy (which accentuates the unmediated presentation by denying the presence of the medium and the act of mediation) and hypermediacy (which acknowledges multiple acts of representation and marks the presence of older media) are used to reproduce a rich and transparent news environment on the Internet.

The immediacy of the Internet as a news medium comes through its "interactivity," allowing users greater control over their communication experience. Interactivity, however, is by no means unique to the Internet, or new media in general. As Rafaeli (1988) notes:

Interactivity is generally assumed to be a natural attribute of face-to-face conversation, but it has been proposed to occur in mediated communication

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settings as well. For example, interactivity is also one of the defining characteristics of two-way cable systems, electronic text systems, and some programming work as in interactive video games. Interactivity is present in the operation of traditional media, too. The phenomena of letters to the editor, talk shows on radio and television, listener participation in programs, and in programming are all characterized by interactivity (1988, p. 110).

However, in comparison with traditional news media, the Internet holds great potential for interactive communication. The very structure of conventional news media implies "the propagation of a single message from a central point to large, highly distributed audience with no ready means for [audience] response" (Newhagen, Coedes, & Levy, 1995, p. 165). It is built on a one-way model that excludes "the possibilities of a return information loop between message producers and receivers" (ibid, p. 166). While it is true that earlier media have claimed to be more or less interactive, conventional news media are not structured to facilitate users' interactivity in a timely and functional fashion. The architecture of the Internet, on the other hand, is based on networked communication models that encourage multiple-way interaction. This implies, as Newhagen and Levy (1998) argue, "complex and potentially egalitarian power relationships between information mangers and end users" (1998, p.18).

As a key advantage of the Internet, interactivity has recently become a widely recognized subject in new media research. However, Internet literature mainly offers contradictory views with no or little consensus on a basic definition of interactivity. The different approaches applied to the study of interactivity further complicate the conceptualization process. Based on the literature, three broad perspectives on interactivity can be identified. The first is a technologically-driven perspective that

defines interactivity in terms of the properties of the medium. For instance, Jensen (1998) defines interactivity as "a measure of a media's potential ability to let the user exert an influence on the content and/or form of the mediated communication" (1998, p. 201). Similarly, Steuer (1992) identifies interactivity as "... the extent to which users can participate in modifying the form and content of a mediated environment in real time" (1992, p. 84). The second perspective is based on models of interpersonal communication, and therefore focuses on the exchange of messages and roles between participants in the communication process. According to Rafaeli & Sudweeks (1997), "interactivity is not a characteristic of the medium. It is a process-related construct about communication. It is the extent to which messages in a sequence relate to each other, and especially the extent to which later messages recount the relatedness of earlier messages" (1997). In similar vein, Williams, Rice, & Rogers (1988) define interactivity as "the degree to which participants in a communication process have control over, and can exchange roles in, their mutual discourse" (1988, p. 10). Unlike other approaches, the third perspective posits interactivity to be a product of the audience's perception. Along these lines, Newhagen, Cordes, and Levy (1995) conceive of interactivity as a variable that can reside in individuals' minds. This third perspective views interactivity as a psychological state latent in the attitudes of media users (1995, p. 166).

Some other researchers suggest that interactivity cannot be neatly defined by any of the three perspectives presented above. Instead, they define interactivity as a multidimensional construct. Carrie Heeter (1989) proposes a six-pronged definition of interactivity: the complexity of choice available; the effort users must exert;

responsiveness to the user; the monitoring of information use; ease of adding information; and the degree of facilitation of interpersonal communication (1989, p. 220). Ha and James (1998) define interactivity as "the extent to which the communicator and the audience respond to, or are willing to facilitate, each other's communication needs... [It] consists of five dimensions capable of fulfilling different communication needs: playfulness, choice, connectedness, information collection, and reciprocal communication" (1998, p. 457). Massey and Levy (1999) in their study of interactivity and online journalism propose two broad dimensions of interactivity. "One is content interactivity, defined generally as the degree to which journalists technologically empower consumers over content. The second is interpersonal interactivity, or the extent to which news audiences can have computer-mediated conversations through journalists' technological largess" (1999, p. 140).

Sally McMillan (2002) proposes what seems to be an overarching conception of the term. She suggests that interactivity encompasses three different modes of interaction: user-to-user, user-to-document, and user-to-system (2002, p. 166). User-to-user interactivity focuses on new media's capacity to function as "a conduit for communication that flows back and forth among communication participants" (2002, p. 168). It thus provides a multidirectional communication milieu that facilitates mutual discourse between source and receiver. User-to-document interactivity concerns individual control over content, which "extends beyond simply navigating through a standard set of options.... Interactive content should dynamically respond to individual actions" (2002, p. 171). Ideally, this type of interactivity allows all participants to share in the creation of

"collaborative" content. User-to-system interactivity focuses on the interaction between people and the computer itself. It indicates that a high degree of responsiveness and transparency is built into the computer interface, allowing for users to have greater impact on their experiences; therefore, they become more immersed in these experiences (2002, pp. 173-175). Thus, McMillan's perspective, while recognizing interactivity as a central characteristic of Internet technology (and new media in general), takes into account the communication context, exchange of messages, and user's control over communicative practices.

These three types of interactivity are by no means mutually exclusive. In many ways, the different forms of interactivity overlap. For instance, reader response to newspaper editors, while clearly classified under user-to-user interactivity, crosses over into user-to-document interactivity as people address the content creators. Hypertext also represents the interrelations between user-to-document and user-to-system interactivities. In fact, many researchers underscore the importance of hypertext and its contribution to new media interactivity. As George Landow (1997) asserts, hypertext, which he defines as "text composed of blocks of words (or images) linked electronically by multiple paths, chains, or trails in an open-ended, perpetually unfinished textuality described by the terms *link, node, network, web, and path*," provides choices to the reader, creating easy and transparent movements among a web of texts that are "experienced as nonlinear, or, more properly, as multilinear or multisequential." Through hyperlinks, Internet text is situated within a field of relations and connections, most of which other media "keep out of sight and relatively difficult to follow" (1997, pp. 3-4). With the provision of interlocking

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documents, hypertext implies "the collapse of the independent, isolated document. Every document always is potentially linked with any other document." Hypertext thus empowers readers in their interaction with the content to redefine "the traditional relationships of author and reader or text and commentary" (Jackson, 1997).

Overall, interactivity is a hybrid construct that allows Internet users to exert three levels of control: interpersonal, content, and process (or interface-based). Further, as Rafaeli and Sudweeks (1997) note, "the concept of interactivity directs our focus to the intersection of the psychological and the sociological, the bridge between mass and interpersonal communication, [and] the meeting of mediated and direct communication" (1997). As a news medium, the Internet thus offers a substantial improvement over existing media. It promises to achieve immediacy and transparency through an interactive communication environment that uses old techniques of interpersonal communication, while transcending limitations of time and space. It facilitates customization of content and presentation to meet individual needs, granting users greater control over the communication process.

On the other hand, since the Internet remediates visual and verbal media, its interface can never be completely transparent. Instead, the multiple acts of remediation emphasize the hypermediated nature of the Internet. However, this same hypermediated nature provides a rich and inclusive news environment that strives for multiplicity and completeness in the communication experience. As the Internet provides the written word, graphics, sound, animation and video in digital forms, it allows for heterogeneous,

multimedia spaces that produce an open, multi-layered text, which is unattainable in traditional media. As Ananda Mitra and Elisia Cohen (1999) suggest:

> In the case of traditional printed text, meaning was constrained because the text was composed primarily of words and sentences that presented narratives with occasional use of pictures. In many ways, the printed text was made up of symbolic signs... and occasionally used the iconic sign to supplement the symbols. On the other hand, in the case of audiovisual texts, such as television and film, the text did not offer the possibility of using the printed word but was principally iconic in nature. Thus, both these texts were constrained in their potential for polysemy. The WWW text, however, offers a convergence of different kinds of representational strategies" (1999, p. 188).

The hypermediacy of the Internet simply extends the notion of hypertext by digitally integrating visual information, sound, animation, and text in a single technological system, expanding "the notion of text beyond the solely verbal" (Landow, 1997, p. 3). Such a digital integration of media types gives the Internet great synthetic capabilities. Thus, logics of remediation, immediacy and hypermediacy are employed in representing the Internet as an improved news medium that tries to:

> get past the limits of representation and to achieve the real... [It is] not striving for the real in any metaphysical sense. Instead, the real is defined in terms of the viewer's experience; it is that which would evoke an immediate (and therefore authentic) emotional response. Transparent digital applications seek to get to the real by bravely denying the fact of mediation; digital hypermedia seek the real by multiplying mediation so as to create a feeling of fullness, a satiety of experience, which can be taken as reality (Bolter and Grusin, 1999, p. 53).

The Internet is thus a hybrid and inclusive news medium, one that represents a substantial improvement over the print medium. The online news medium promises a new transparency by allowing the reader greater control over the communication experience. The reader can negotiate different methods of news selection and modify the

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order of the text by pursuing the hyperlinks provided. He/she can communicate with journalists and other readers, offering suggestions, asking questions, making comments, or even starting discussion on issues in the news. The online news medium also offers transparency through animation, video and audio feeds that cannot appear in a printed version. The reader gets closer to the event by accessing such transparent media instead of mere prose. At the same time, the use of different representation strategies emphasizes the medium's hypermediacy and, therefore, the richness of the online news environment.

Al-Ahram and *Al-Wafd* Online News Services

Al-Ahram is the largest newspaper in Egypt and also the largest Arabic paper in the world, with Middle Eastern, European and North American editions. It is the oldest newspaper in all Arab countries, first published 127 years ago on August 5, 1876. Since the 1960s, following the nationalization of all publishing houses, *Al-Ahram* has espoused government views and promoted the policies of the regime. It has also established itself as the voice of pan-Arab nationalism, covering events from a pan-Arab perspective and consistently featuring the views and ideas of leading Arab intellectuals. Hence, it has a prominent position and wide readership in the whole Arab region. Under the editorship of Mohamed Hassanein Heikal (1957-1974), who was President Nasser's confidant and by far the most influential journalist during the Nasser era, *Al-Ahram* developed its editorial offices and technological facilities, establishing a journalistic empire that has continued to develop over time. It is now one of the largest press houses in the Middle East, publishing twelve newspapers and magazines in Arabic, English, and French in addition to the parent

daily newspaper. Furthermore, *Al-Ahram* owns investments and shares in several profitable corporations and banks.

In 1999, the total income of *Al-Ahram* publishing house was 1,151,000,000 Egyptian pounds (US$ 287,750,000) of which distribution revenues were E£ 253,000,000 (US$ 63,250,000) and advertising revenues amounted to E£ 541,000,000 (US$ 135,250,000). The total number of employees in the same year was 9,619. The editorial staff of *Al-Ahram* daily includes the editor-in-chief, a managing editor, deputies, assistants, and 450 other editors and reporters; they work in a huge, modern building in downtown Cairo with its own social, medical, and security services (Al-Ahram Foundation, 2001). The *Al-Ahram* newspaper has a daily circulation of 600,000 copies and 900,000 copies on Fridays (the weekend edition). Although its circulation number is slightly smaller than the other leading Egyptian daily, *Al-Akhbar*, its influence extends well beyond what these numbers imply. As a conservative and elitist newspaper, *Al-Ahram* has a significant position in the Egyptian media landscape and is read by government officials, members of the business community, intellectuals and university professors.

With the diffusion of the Internet in Egypt, *Al-Ahram* considered using the new medium to publish a news web site. However, according to Omar Samy, manager of *Al-Ahram* Management and Computer Center, the online news site project was delayed until the technical problems of displaying Arabic letters as a text file rather than an image file could be solved; this was needed to enhance the legibility of the letters and to avoid using large image files that require an excessively long time for downloading. Arabic HTML text also allows for the use of hyperlinks within the text and lends itself to text searches, a

key advantage of publishing content online (Samy, personal communication, 2002). On July 18, 1998, *Al-Ahram* launched its web site, which, it was decided, would mirror the paper-based news product and be freely accessible to Internet users. In its first ten days, *Al-Ahram* 's site received around 100,000 visits daily (Al-Ahram Online, 1998, August 15). The site is produced by a number of part-time journalists, who originally worked in different journalistic capacities for the *Al-Ahram* newspaper, under the supervision of the managing editor.

Unlike *Al-Ahram*, *Al-Wafd* is a party newspaper that was founded in March 1984. Initially published on Thursdays as a weekly paper, *Al-Wafd* became a daily in 1988. The New Al-Wafd Party that owns the paper sprang from the delegation formed by the nationalist Saad Zaghloul in 1918 to demand complete independence from the British. The Al-Wafd party was officially founded a year later. The party gained wide popularity in Egypt and remained a powerful actor on the political scene until the 1952 revolution, after which all political parties were outlawed. Although political pluralism was restored in 1977, the resurgence of the New Al-Wafd party came only in 1984, when President Mubarak approved its formation. The New Al-Wafd Party is a coalition of landowners, professionals and merchants, led by a number of university scholars. The party's main plank calls for genuine democracy and political liberalization, including competitive presidential elections. It also demands economic liberalization, a radical reduction of state intervention in the economy, and a downsizing of the public sector.

The *Al-Wafd* newspaper now has the largest readership of any opposition paper in Egypt. The paper's goal, according to its previous editor-in-chief Gamal Badawi, is "to

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call for a democratic society in which political and economic freedoms are guaranteed—a democracy that is based on a strong constitution that cannot be abused" (Al-Ahram Weekly Online, 1995, 19-25 October). In its early days, *Al-Wafd* often adopted a harsh tone in its criticism of the government, with fiery articles by then editor-in-chief Mustafa Sherdy. Under Sherdy's editorship, the weekly edition's circulation reached 500,000 copies and the daily's 350,000. After Sherdy's death, the newspaper's critical language was toned down. In spite of this, *Al-Wafd* is still popular and continues to have a circulation of about 250,000 copies. Many Egyptians consider it the most credible opposition newspaper because it is open to writers from different ideological backgrounds.

While considered to be in a better financial position than other party newspapers, *Al-Wafd* generally has limited resources in comparison to *Al-Ahram* and lacks its own printing plant. It is printed on the *Al-Ahram* presses. The online news service of *Al-Wafd* started in March 1998 as a weekly service that was published every Sunday, summarizing the important news articles culled from the daily newspaper editions throughout the week (Ibrahim, 1999, p. 127). In December 2001, *Al-Wafd,* in cooperation with an external Internet service company, began to experiment with a new web site, which was published online by March 2002. This new site, which is also dependent on the newspaper, is updated daily and largely expands the use of interactive capabilities of the Internet. News for the online site is produced by two journalists, appointed specifically for this job, under the supervision of the editor-in-chief.

Al-Ahram and *Al-Wafd* Online Producers Define Online News

On the conceptual level, interviews with the producers of online news in both organizations reveal that they have definite ideas about the online news product. According to them, the added value of news on the Internet is dependent on four key concepts: speed and instantaneity, interactivity, hypertext and multimedia. Hence, they believe that the Internet is a new space that has its own logic and grammar. They all concur with Melinda McAdams (1995) that online news "cannot be a strict translation of the print product. To try to put the newspaper online and stay true to the print concept would be to severely handicap the online product" (1995, p. 88). To some online editors, the content of online news should be original, exclusively produced for the online environment. It should stand alone and apart from the print content. Others, however, admit the difficulty that hinders this practice. Budget constraints, lack of full-time staff members working exclusively on the online news site, and the organizations' desire for continuity between the online and print news products, often dictate that the content of the newspaper is "shoveled" onto the Internet. As the supervisor of *Al-Ahram*'s site notes,

> The chief goal was not to create a separate news product. In fact, with the sweeping trend of information revolution and the Internet, *Al-Ahram* thought to use the new technology to give the newspaper a wider distribution, and to keep its leading position not only among Egyptian media, but also in the whole Arab World (Salama, personal communication, 2002).

Al-Ahram thus created its web site with a strategic aim to gain a foothold in the media of the future, and therefore promote the organization's image as a leading Egyptian and Arab newspaper. It has, as interviews with online editors reveal, no intention to develop the web site as a distinct news outlet. Moreover, the lack of clear organizational vision for

its online service and concern about the negative effects of *Al-Ahram* online site on the paper's distribution have slowed down the development of the web site and hindered the full utilization of Internet capacities as a news medium. For example, when the online edition began, editors were asked to post the online news content not before 3 p.m. every day, hours after the paper had hit the streets. It took the online editors about two years to convince their superiors that this was not a good way to attract readers to their site, and began to post the news immediately after the paper's deadline.

According to the online staff, *Al-Ahram* news web site does not take full advantage of the Internet's characteristics. So far, *Al-Ahram* online has been tied to the print newspaper's schedule and deadline. Although the Internet offers speed and instantaneity for the news industry, providing the reader with up-to-the-minute information without the delay of print media, the organization rejects the idea of delivering breaking news stories. As one editor puts it:

> Every time we propose a project to develop our web site, to post breaking news, update news stories throughout the day and provide more interactive features, they [the organization managers] reject it and even put barriers against any kind of change. They always say that we are not like CNN or Al-Jazeera. We are a newspaper; and we should keep within the boundaries of journalistic tradition. In fact, they want a copy of the newspaper, and it is very hard for them to think of the Internet as a new model, a new medium that has to be based on a different concept than the traditional print concept. This might need a new mind-set. And, with the presence of Al-Jazeera and BBC Arabic service web sites, and others, which provide a continuous stream of news coverage, the chance of online newspapers drawing Internet users is really diminishing (An *Al-Ahram* online editor, personal communication, 2002).

Thus, while the Internet has the capacity to alter the conception of time as a restriction on print news production, the organization' desire to look at the Internet as a distribution arm

of its print paper forces the online producers to adhere to the print routines and traditions of the newspaper, which might seem impractical and stilted for news on the web. The very few times online editors updated news stories or posted some breaking news (such as on September 11), they, in fact, were challenging the organizational philosophy and rules governing its web site. Nevertheless, they consider these practices a real necessity on occasion; otherwise, users would be shocked to find the *Al-Ahram* site ignoring serious events, or delaying its coverage until the next day. In this respect, the instantaneity of the Internet seems to put new pressures on online news producers to respond to its dynamic capabilities and to reorganize their work not in terms of fixed schedule and deadlines, but to reflect the most timely news of the day. Jim Hall (2001) expresses this tension between print and online news cultures, arguing that:

> Many print journalists… work to the principle that news stories can attain a kind of completion. The assumption derives more from the nature of deadlines and the packaging and filing of news stories than to any intrinsic quality of events in the contingent world. The 24hour news cycle and current modes of news consumption make any such assumption completely redundant. In integrated newsrooms, the online editors will attend all editorial meetings and keep their teams informed about network plans for coverage. Such meetings are increasingly focused on breaking news and how stories are developing…. Stories are posted to the website… as they break and they will be continuously updated. Stories and elements that are not date-lined can be irritating for readers and, of course, news sites that are not updated continuously are likely to lose their readers rapidly. …[T]his comprises a change in culture…. Newspaper reporters today have grown up with the culture that at a certain time my story will be done… it makes no sense for online journalists to file to deadlines (2001, pp. 80-81).

Al-Ahram online editors also consider interactivity to be a significant advantage of the Internet that sets this medium apart from traditional news sources. They express their desire to increase the interactive features of their web site. In their definition of

interactivity, they focus on interpersonal communication with the readers. One editor explains:

> This medium allows for breaking the distance between you and the readers. You have the opportunity to get information and comments from the readers through E-mails, to know their opinions and views through online polls and surveys, and to even interact directly with them in chat rooms or through discussion boards (An *Al-Ahram* online editor, personal communication, 2002).

Another editor assigns great importance to interaction with readers in terms of creating connections with reader communities and building trust in this new medium. She stresses:

> The Internet gives you new ways of relating or connecting to your readers. Through the use of different interactive features, you build a reader's trust in your site. And, at the end, you create a positive attitude towards the web site (An *Al-Ahram* online editor, personal communication, 2002).

The online editors also emphasize the importance of content interactivity. They value the capacity of Internet to contextualize the content, integrating many layers of background information and making connections and associations with related developments, facts, and stories. Through the use of hypertext, news stories have new opportunities for expression and a wider potential for meanings. As one online editor notes, "this [hypertext] enables you to present a more complete story, the history of the story [and] the story behind the story.... You have the ability to focus the lens on each detail in the story" (An *Al-Ahram* online editor, personal communication, 2002). To some of the online editors, building a comprehensive database that is constantly updated seems to be the proper approach to providing an interactive, hypertextual news web site. In fact, *Al-Ahram* online editors' vision of Internet news is akin to what new media critic, Nora Paul (1995), calls annotative journalism, which denotes new models of the news story as a

source of in-depth content, providing not just explanation but embedded links to other relevant documents that offer historical accounts, biographies, and contextualized information (1995). With this vision, *Al-Ahram* online editors seem to present a departure from the traditional journalistic culture. As McAdams 1995 notes, "A journalist with little online experience tends to think in terms of stories, news value, public service and things that are good to read, but a person with a lot of online experience thinks more about connection, organization, movement within and among sets of information and communication among different people" (1995, p. 84).

However, this vision is still far from being fully realized in the *Al-Ahram* news site. Although the site offers some interactive features and hyperlinks, the online editors admit that the site leaves much to be desired. They explain these shortcomings in terms of the management insistence on resemblance between the news site and the parent newspaper and the traditional journalistic resistance to reader input and interactivity. As one online editor states:

> In July 1999, we set up a special, purely online section on sport news, which provides a model of the interactive site with many hyperlinks to related stories and background information. We invited readers to participate in some online surveys on Egyptian sports; and we even published a story about their opinions. Then, we proposed to extend this model to the entire web site, but the managers rejected this proposal. They don't understand the interactive and open nature of the Internet medium; or they don't want to understand (An *Al-Ahram* online editor, personal communication, 2002).

Online editors of *Al-Ahram* also express a great interest in incorporating all media to enhance their news service. Although *Al-Ahram* online uses some audiovisual materials in covering sport news stories, the editors wish to extend this practice to different news

sections. Whether they are prepared to work in a truly multimedia context remains a wide-open question. It seems that they need some form of training in order to integrate different communication modalities and features. Further, the current bandwidth capacity and compression technology of the Internet make the use of sound, video, and animation rather problematic.

Despite the various obstacles, *Al-Ahram* online editors still believe that publishing news on the Internet requires a new model of story telling. A news story has to be shorter, guiding the reader to the main points as quickly as possible while providing further details to the interested reader through hyperlinks. One online editor notes, "readers aren't looking for a block of text; they want to know what's going on. And they want to know it quickly. A news story might have to be concise, getting directly to the point" (An *Al-Ahram* online editor, personal communication, 2002). Another online editor explains the need for a condensed style of news writing as a major difference between the newspaper and the Internet. Computer screens, which have neither the portability nor the tactility of printed papers, make the act of reading somewhat more difficult.

Unlike *Al-Ahram* editors, *Al-Wafd* online staffers focus mainly on the interactivity of online news. They conceive of the uniqueness of the Internet in terms of its unbounded capacity to engage the readers in a constant dialogue with news producers and with each other. In such an open space, readers are empowered to voice their views and to participate in the process of news making. One online editor explains:

> On the Internet, the reader becomes a part of the journalistic equation.
> Online news stories are no more a unidirectional message or discourse.
> The reader participates. And according to this participation, we may

change our viewpoint; we may offer an updated story; [and] we may realize that our coverage has missed important points. But in all cases, we surely know the public opinion and readers' interests that are used as an input in our news work (An *Al-Wafd* online editor, personal communication, 2002).

While there is some degree of idealism behind the *Al-Wafd* online editors' conception of Internet news and its impacts, it is perhaps not entirely unfounded. The systematic efforts to get readers involved in the telling of the news are immense. *Al-Wafd* news site offers an interactive space next to each news story for readers to discuss and comment on that story. As well, it publishes online polls related to news stories to elicit readers' opinions and viewpoints. A general E-mail address of the site is also provided. Additionally, the *Al-Wafd* site hosts a public forum that discusses political, economic and cultural issues and events, information and communication technology, Egyptian media issues, religion, education, and health, among other topics. At the time of this study, *Al-Wafd* forum has become extremely active with almost one thousand registered participants debating numerous topics with a monthly posting of several thousand messages.

Al-Wafd thus perceives its online presence as a new paradigm that offers a different mode of communication based on interaction with readers. Perhaps the view of Merrill Morris and Christine Ogan (1996) of the Internet as "a multifaceted mass medium... [that] plays with the source-message-receiver features of the traditional mass communication model... putting them into entirely new configurations" (1996, p. 42) is very close to online editors' concepts about the interchangeability of message producers and receivers. As the online editors note, the Internet has the ability to redefine the relationship between news producers and readers, providing a more effective platform for

readers' input and reflections, which find its way to publication even in the printed paper. John Pavlik and Steven Ross (2000) assert that the value of the Internet mostly resides in its capacity to alter traditional relationships in the news industry, empowering the public and re-inventing the role of news producers toward a creative engagement with their audiences (2000, p. 131). Along these lines, *Al-Wafd* online editors treat the Internet as a networked communication medium that removes the one-way directionality of traditional media, and builds reciprocal relationships with readers. They believe that viewing the Internet as a multimedia and hypertextual environment alone is rather myopic. The major impact of the Internet resides in its interactivity, giving people opportunities for participation and, more importantly, institutionalizing their involvement in the news-making process.

For *Al-Wafd* editors, interactivity is not just the offer of more choices to readers or a routine feedback space with a general E-mail address. Instead, interactivity is "to listen to the readers, to be responsive to them, and to involve them in the fabric of the news industry itself" (An *Al-Wafd* online editor, personal communication, 2002). In their opinion, this is what distances online news most distinctly from its traditional predecessors and what actually makes the Internet a democratic medium attractive to the readers. With such interaction and the possibility of participating in the development of news stories, readers get more interested and are drawn back to the site. The online staff asserts that a large number of *Al-Wafd* journalists value the Internet as a medium that connects them with their readers. Unlike *Al-Ahram* journalists whom the online editors describe as ignoring the site, a large number of *Al-Wafd* journalists visit the site almost

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daily to get readers' comments on their news stories. Many of them participate in the online forum. In addition, the online editors' views about online poll results and readers' comments, proposals and reflections are discussed in the daily news meeting, which one of the online editors attends.

It is thus clear that *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd* editors have fundamentally different conceptions of online news. While *Al-Ahram* editors view the Internet as a news environment which offers substantial improvements over the print medium in terms of the content and the form of news, *Al-Wafd* editors stress the capacity of the Internet to engage the readers in news making. In the *Al-Ahram* online news service, there is some tension between the online editors' understanding of the Internet and the institutional view of this medium and its functions. As interviews with *Al-Ahram* online editors reveal, Internet capabilities give rise to a news environment that challenges a number of traditional newspaper practices and routines. In insisting, however, the online news site resemble the newspaper, *Al-Ahram* restricts the use of these capabilities. On the other hand, while there is a degree of idealism that colors *Al-Wafd* online editors' understanding of the Internet, there seems to be no contradiction between their views and the organization's view of the Internet. As a liberal opposition party newspaper that opens its pages to writers from across the political spectrum and calls for greater freedom of expression in society, *Al-Wafd* believes the Internet presents an unprecedented opportunity to involve readers and allow them to express their views and opinions, most of which are critical of government policies.

Constructing The Online Audience

In the new environment of the Internet, where audiences often have different expectations of the medium than they do of traditional news media, online journalists and their institutions are concerned about developing a clear image of their audiences. However, this is a difficult task. On the one hand, online news is a new, confusing world, one that has a boundary-transcending capacity that enables audiences in multiple geographic areas to access different news sites. On the other hand, online journalists, in most cases, have backgrounds in communication media whose audiences have usually been geographically defined; and, for the most part, they produce locally oriented content for their online news sites. Thus, between the local nature of the content and the global usage of the medium, the question of constructing a clear image of online audiences is problematic. In fact, online journalists find themselves in a situation where they have to define a new kind of audience, an audience that could potentially be worldwide. As John Pavlik (2001) notes, "Journalists now need to think about a global audience that not only reads what they write and report but can comment, provide perspective, and offer new insight into the complexities of an increasingly global society. This is the essence of the contextualized journalism possible in the digital age" (2001, p. 27).

However, Internet technology itself does facilitate tracking the audience. It has a unique ability to provide potentially valuable data on users of Internet sites, and thus helps inform online journalists about their audiences. The technology, therefore, can act as a significant source of information in constructing an image of the audience. Ingunn Hagen (1999) argues that the images that media professionals hold of their audiences are

based on different types of experience and knowledge. In particular, she distinguishes

between:

> Two ways of developing these images, related to two kinds of
> organizational learning. In what can be characterized as single-loop
> learning, journalists develop their image of the audience within the
> institution and in cooperation with each other. Single-loop learning often
> implies that organizational norms and standards remain unchanged.
> Double-loop learning, on the other hand, means that media professionals
> and institutions get information from outside—such as from companies
> that provide audience measurement. These different kinds of learning
> horizons could also be characterized as closed and open loops. Double-
> loop learning implies that new standards are developed (1999, p. 133).

Generally, what Hagen termed "single loop learning" is the dominant strategy of

Egyptian news media in constructing an image of their audience. These images of

audiences are largely subjective and intuitive, generated not by empirical market research

or other formal quantitative methods. Instead, the audience is a cultural category, which

the producers form from a number of sources, including their experiences, their personal

projections about who their audience is, their knowledge of the news industry, and their

product image. However, the Internet offers online news services easily available means

to operate what Hagen referred to as a double or open loop tracking and thus a different

kind of learning. Log files recorded by Internet servers (computers that host or serve up

web pages) produce and dynamically update users' access and interaction data, including

"demographic, navigation and activity, and performance" data (Burton and Walther,

2001). Demographic data describe people accessing a site by IP address, domain name

(e.g., .org, .com), country (if exposed as a suffix of the domain name), new versus

returning users, and visits by distinctly authorized users (using ID and password).

Navigation and activity server log data provide an array of information on user

interactions such as navigation paths, number of accesses, time spent on a page, average time per visit, and entrance and exit pages. Performance data describe "the load on a Web server and the responsiveness of the Web server. Performance information can include: megabytes of information served by the site, page demand… [and] average data transferred per day" (Burton and Walther, 2001). Log files thus provide an array of information that has never before been available to newspaper editors. In addition to computer-generated data, the interactivity of the Internet facilitates online surveys and research that could produce demographically rich accounts of audiences.

For *Al-Ahram* online news, the analysis of recent server log data, according to Omar Samy, manager of *Al-Ahram* Management and Computer Center, indicates that the site gets between 40,000 and 60,000 visits daily, with 1.5 to 2 millions hits (a hit is any file accessed by a reader. For example, when accessing a page with text and four pictures, this records five hits). 60 percent of *Al-Ahram* web site visits come from the United States and Canada, 30 percent from Egypt and Arab countries, and 10 percent from different world countries. The most popular pages are the First Page, and the Sports, Writers, and Obituary sections. Furthermore, most of the site's E-mail comes from North America. Besides this information, however, *Al-Ahram* had not done any kind of survey or analysis of audiences (Samy, personal communication, 2002).

While the online editors' image of the audiences of *Al-Ahram* site was initially not very clear and far from complete, *Al-Ahram* has gradually created an institutional image of its online audiences. James Ettema and Charles Whitney (1994) call this process "audiencemaking," the way in which media organizations determine "institutionally

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effective audiences that have social meaning and/or economic value within the system."
These are not the assemblage of actual individual receivers of media messages, but instead are the institutional images of "specialized or segmented audiences whose particular interests are anticipated—or created—and then met by content producers" (1994, p. 5). This institutional image of the audience is primarily focused on Egyptians living abroad especially in North America. The basic assumption is that communities of Egyptian immigrants living in the U.S and Canada have general interest in their home country, and wish to be able to keep up with what is going on back in Egypt. Also, there are a number of foreign institutions, international organizations and research centers that are interested in Egyptian and Arab region news. Accordingly, the news web site should address the needs of groups in the Egyptian diaspora, connecting them with their homeland, and, at the same time, present a positive cyber face of Egypt to foreign organizations and users.

The definition of *Al-Ahram* online audiences as only those who are geographically located outside Egypt has two significant implications. First, it justifies the insistence of *Al-Ahram* managers that the Internet be treated as merely an extension of the newspaper. Second, it alleviates the need to create original content for the online service or to expand the use interactive and multimedia features of the Internet. Because online news is only directed at the long-distance market, where the print edition of the newspaper is not readily available, shovelware does not present a problem since there is no competition of print and online news in the same market. Egyptian readers in North America would not care if the online product provides exactly the same information as its print newspaper. In

fact, it may very well be that they visit the web site to look for the content of the print edition. Although *Al-Ahram* has an international edition that is printed daily in New York, and distributed across North America, this edition in most cases does not reach different geographic areas of the American continent in a timely fashion. Therefore, there is no real competition between the online news and the international edition of *Al-Ahram*.

Hsiang Chyi and George Sylvie (2001) comment that "shovelware in the long-distance market is... a less-than-unique local product to an audience that would find it unique.... In this sense, pleasing long-distance audiences is relatively easy when there is a lack of intermedia competition" (2001, pp. 233-4). Similarly, *Al-Ahram* managers feel that it is sufficient to post the newspaper content on the Internet to serve Egyptians abroad, who are first and foremost interested in reading that content. Using the distinctive features of the Internet is therefore not a major issue of concern to them. Yet in assuring that its online audience has no access to the print newspaper, *Al-Ahram* has severely constrained the appeal of its web site. In the local market, the *Al-Ahram* web site with no added value suffers unfavorable competition with the newspaper, which is cheaper and portable. Thus, the organizational image of the audience has led to strategies that reduce the potential audience, and solely cater to the very narrowly defined diasporic audience, who cannot buy the paper version.

On the other hand, *Al-Wafd*'s understanding of the Internet medium and the purpose of the online site create a better news site that would attract a large number of readers, regardless of their geographical location. As interviews with online editors reveal, the institutional image of the audience includes both local and global readers. They are

interested in expanding the reach of the *Al-Wafd* newspaper to Egyptians who are living abroad, particularly in distant places such as North America and Europe, where the print newspaper is never distributed, other than the limited distribution of the weekly edition. But they are also concerned with bringing their online news product to a local audience. Unfortunately, *Al-Wafd* editors would not reveal data about their audiences. As the news site is still in its early stages, one online editor says that the number of visits to the site constantly fluctuates. "But it is generally in a continuous increase," he says. The most popular pages are the First Page, the Local News, Opinion, Sports and Crime sections as well as the weekly section, The Sparrow (a political gossip and criticism section). One of *Al-Wafd* online editors asserts that the site receives a large number of E-mails from inside and outside Egypt. Further, the record of registered users in the *Al-Wafd* forum indicates that participants are geographically diverse.

The editorial policy and news strategies adopted by the *Al-Wafd* news site recognize both audience groups. On the one hand, the web site provides an array of important political, economic and cultural news originally covered by the newspaper to Egyptians living abroad, and thus addresses their desire to remain informed about Egypt. On the other hand, the site presents an interactive news environment that allows the local audience to interact with news stories and news producers and therefore to experience news consumption in a way which is unique to the Internet medium. As a result, there is less competition between the newspaper and the online site, which differentiates itself by using interactive features that would not be possible in the print version. The distinctiveness of the online news product constitutes a new market for the *Al-Wafd* site

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within the same market of the *Al-Wafd* newspaper. The online news site appeals to users not simply as a substitute for the print version but as supplementary to it, offering unique interactive communication experience.

Producing Online News: Gate-keeping or Gate-opening

Media decisions about which news stories should be published, and therefore reach the public, have often been described as elements of the editorial "gate-keeping" process. This process, however, involves more than simple selection. Gate-keeping can be defined as "a broader process of information control that includes all aspects of message encoding: not just selection but also withholding, transmission, shaping, display, repetition and timing of information. The gate-keeping process involves every aspect of message selection, handling and control" (Shoemaker, 1991, p. 1). The gate-keeping metaphor, which originated with Kurt Lewin's (1947) theory of channels and gatekeepers and their influence on producing widespread social change in a community, was first introduced to mainstream communication studies by David Manning White in his classic study *The 'Gate Keeper': A Case Study in the Selection of News* (1950) in which he examined the process of news selection performed by a wire editor, whom he called "Mr. Gates," at a small Midwestern newspaper. Following White, the gate-keeping concept has attracted many communication scholars who have sought to investigate the differential flow of messages throughout time and space.

While early studies of gate-keeping were based on an individualistic approach, explaining selection decisions in terms of single gatekeepers' "psychological factors such

as likes and dislikes, perceptions of 'significant others' and aesthetic preferences"
(Robinson, 1981 p. 90), recent research has put the individual level of analysis into its
broader social context. As Ettema, Whitney, and Wackman (1987) note, "Mass-mediated
symbol systems... are, at one level of analysis, the work of individual or small groups of
media professionals. At another level of analysis, however, they are the product of
complex organizations; at still another, higher level they reflect the economic
arrangements of media industries and institutions" (1997, p. 33). Pamela Shoemaker
(1991) concludes her extensive review of gate-keeping research by presenting a scheme
for analyzing gate-keeping processes on three levels: the broad societal level (ideology
and culture), the everyday work environment (communication routines and organizational
characteristic), and the socially shaped practices and values of individual journalists
(1991, pp. 71-72).

For the past 50 years, the gate-keeping metaphor has been accepted as an accurate
representation of news production and distribution processes not only by communication
scholars, but also by journalists themselves. It has been suggested that "the identification
and dissemination of what is worth knowing is the journalist's most basic and most vital
task" (Singer, 1998). However, with the advent of the Internet and its proliferating use as
a news medium, many scholars call for a reexamination of the gate-keeping concept. John
Newhagen and Mark Levy (1998) argue that the online news environment has a
fundamentally different architecture. Unlike the linear, concentrated communication
architecture of the conventional news media, the Internet is essentially a parallel,
distributed communication structure. In conventional news work, they contend, "large

amounts of information flow in linear fashion from many sources through a narrow, journalistic 'neck' and on to a mass of readers or viewers." The ability to control this linear flow rests almost exclusively with the producer. The result is "an asymmetry in social power" in favor of the producer of news content. During the work, an extensive process of concentration also takes place, "where data are reduced to a potent extract or essence called stories... that enable the printing or broadcasting technology to infinitely replicate them." In conventional media architectures, the producers thus have great control over news selection, framing, and presentation. Their power, however, is most evident "at the moment of story selection, and has been conceptualized as gate-keeping and agenda setting" (1998, pp. 9-13).

On the contrary, Newhagen and Levy argue that the communication architecture of the Internet is:

> nonlinear, and distributed across a vast number of sender-receiver nodes. Because message production can take place at any node in the network, information distribution is a diffuse, parallel process, unlike the compressed, serial process of mass media. Data concentration is unnatural in distributed network architectures that facilitate dispersed message production. Thus, the application of canons or standards produced to deal with mass media systems may be unnatural, unrealistic, and practically impossible to apply in a setting where any participant is equally likely to be a message producer as a message receiver. Members of such a system are more likely to be true peers (1998, pp. 15-16).

As such, the Internet architecture, Newhagen and Levy contend, is antithetical to information control. Computer science and engineering focus on more efficient forms of path-finding rather than gate-keeping. In conventional media work, producers derive their power from being able to say, "Because of my position in the architecture you *have* to pass through me to find out what's important." On the Internet, the pathfinder might

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inform the user, "tell me what you need and I will guide you through this complex environment" (1998, p. 18). The Internet's distributed architecture thus diminishes the power of communication professionals and threatens their control over the news gate. In a similar vein, media critic Jim Hall (2001) speaks of the disintermediation effect of the Internet; that is the capacity of the Internet to decrease the need for mediation by media professionals. He argues:

> The roles that journalism assigned to itself in the mid-nineteenth century, on the strength of its newly acquired professionalism, as gatekeeper, agenda-setter and news filter, are all placed at risk when its primary sources become readily available to its audiences. The commentary, fact-checking and inflection that journalism places on such material remain available to readerships as secondary texts but the web itself has taken over the role of mediating those sourced for audiences. This intermediation effect also applies to retailers, legislators and book publisher; e-commerce allows the web to adopt the role of intermediary in business and politics as readily and effectively as it mediates news and information (2001, p. 53).

The online world, according to these perspectives, is thus conceived as an open space that changes news from what was essentially the creation of a group of socialized gatekeepers choosing and designing news for audiences, to a new kind of information world where readers become authors or at least more direct and active information seekers, a world that breaks down the gates. The Internet in these perspectives, Singer (1998) comments, is depicted as the best example of a postmodern medium.

> [I]t provides the opportunity for creation of a highly personal pastiche, in which all importance, all meaning is relative to an individual perspective. Users can find anything they want online. They don't need someone else to do the picking and choosing. They don't need someone else to decide what's important. They don't need someone else to digest and package their information. They don't need someone else to interpret that information for them. Or do they? (1998)

In fact, the Internet clearly seems to threaten the role of journalists as gatekeepers. But it cannot eliminate the process of gate-keeping as an effective mechanism for information and news processing and for managing the overwhelming amount of information that deluges the users of the Internet. Of course, the Internet places readers in a powerful position vis-à-vis news producers. As readers can virtually find whatever information is of interest to them, they in effect bypass the closed news gates, getting access to what journalists ruled out. This new agency offered to the readers by the Internet leads to journalists' concerns over losing control and authority. One media critic summarizes these concerns:

> What will be the role of journalists when anyone with a computer and modem can lay claim to being a reporter, editor and publisher? Will professional journalists be needed in an era when people can get their news "unfiltered?" What are the ground rules for news in the free-for-all of cyberspace? Do the rituals and conventions of journalism that arose in an era of hot lead and Linotype have any relevance today? Even more fundamentally, what is our job as journalists? Indeed, what is news in an era of information glut? And whose news is it? (Lasica, 1996)

In the face of these concerns, some communication scholars and media observers assert that the need for journalists as gatekeepers will increase rather than decrease in the new online environment. Michael Schudson (1995) invites us to imagine a world where everyone is able to deliver information directly to everyone else through a computer, a world in which everyone can be his or her own journalist. In such a world, people would badly "want ways to sort through the endless information available.... People would want help interpreting and explaining events.... A demand would arise... for interpreters, reporters, [and] editors," who are experienced in doing this job, and therefore trustworthy (1995, p. 2). Similarly, James Fallow (1997) avers that the potential to access more

information than before does not necessarily means that readers will want to formulate their own news. For most Internet users, journalists are needed "to tell them, here are the five main things that happened yesterday, here is the breaking news, here are the things that are important" (1997). In a study of online journalists at three newspapers, Jane Singer (1997) provides evidence that gate-keeping is evolving and adapting rather than disappearing. These journalists' roles are changing from simply selecting information for readers to sorting through and interpreting the huge amount of information available online to provide readers with the best information. "Most of the reporters and editors interviewed believe their function as gatekeepers remains vital, but they see it as being modified to encompass a need for interpretation and quality control" (1997, p. 87).

Overall, it could be said that the Internet is modifying rather than removing the gate-keeping function. The interactive structure of the online environment widens the editorial gate and engages readers in the movement of information and opinion. The use of hypertext allows for a dynamic framework of information. Although news producers control the links provided within the text, hypertextual news implies a broader context, and thus allows more information to pass through the gate. Moreover, as the Internet facilitates readers' participation, allowing for their inputs and comments to be published next to news stories, new perspectives and interpretations could well be added to those stories.

In general, producing news for the online sites of *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd* can be seen as an adapted gate-keeping process which is influenced by the new capacity of the interactive medium and its potential to track audiences, their preferences, and even the

reading paths they follow. Such a gate-keeping process is mainly shaped by everyday working routines, organizational constraints, and online journalists' perceptions and values. Work environments and daily routines at both sites are the basic starting point for putting the news production process in the organizational context. For the *Al-Ahram* online service, news content is produced by a large staff, which consists of an online news site supervisor, eight editors (one of whom assumes the actual responsibility of the editorial management of the site), a computer graphic designer, a web developer and six data entry members. Online editors are relatively young (all under 38 years old). They all have traditional reporting training and some of them have journalism education. Half of them have professional experience in journalism for more than ten years, and the others have between three and six years of experience. In addition to their online editorial work, they have other journalistic duties. Four of them are working as deputy managers in the foreign report department, the foreign news department, and the layout department. And, the others are junior journalists in the foreign news department and in the layout department. Obviously, the *Al-Ahram* organization in this initial phase of online news service has opted for 'redeployment' of existing staff rather than employment of new journalists, using a group of editors who have experience with the computer and the Internet, and whose journalistic work does not require them to leave the editorial floor at any time to cover news stories. Generally, *Al-Ahram* online editors have reasonable computer experience, and all of them have attended some computer and Internet courses at the Management and Computer Center of *Al-Ahram*.

Online editors do their work in two separate places: the newsroom of the newspaper and the production room of the online news service along with the data-entry staff members. Both the web developer and the online graphic designer work in a separate place as part of a central Internet department that assumes the responsibility of developing the web sites for all newspapers and magazines published by *Al-Ahram*. This department also includes a full time staff member who deals with E-mails sent to the *Al-Ahram* web site. Because of the physical separation, both the graphic designer and the web developer have little contact with online editors. Online editors usually discuss web site developments and graphic design issues with the head of the Internet department, who, in turn, arranges for the execution of web developments and design modifications with the web developer and the graphic designer. The Internet department also oversees data-entry staff members, whose work is accomplished in cooperation with the online editors. To some extent, therefore, the organization of the online news service reflects the complex structure of the *Al-Ahram* institution and the general tendency to separate technical and editorial work. However, compared to the hierarchical structure of the print newspaper, the work environment at the *Al-Ahram* online news site is more flexible.

Work on producing online news starts at 7 p.m. after finishing checking the story content and paginating the text for the paper-based news product. One editor selects news stories from copies of the next day's pages, downloads them to computer discs, and then takes them to the online production room. In the meantime, data-entry staff members pull different graphics from the newspaper computers and prepare them for online publishing. Usually, graphics are substantively modified to fit into a computer screen

format and the proportional space preset for a specific graphics location on the web pages of the news product. In the production room, the data-entry staff members, under the supervision of the online editor, download both the text and graphics to a computer program that automatically converts them to a hypertext markup language (HTML). Data-entry staff members do not need any HTML-conversion skills. The online editor usually works for three hours selecting the stories, then data-entry staff members start putting the content and graphics up on the web site at around 10 p.m. and work until midnight (sometimes until 2 or 3 a.m. depending on the difficulty of locating the text and graphics on newspaper computers and the difficulty of changing the graphics' format and size). Once the coding process is finished, the new web pages are sent to a computer queue and automatically posted to both the Egyptian web site and the mirror site in the United States.

Al-Ahram online news is thus published at around midnight every day, hours before the actual distribution of the newspaper in the morning. Another online editor works the next morning on revising and cleaning up any problems on the web pages that developed the previous night. This editor also updates the content according to the last edition of the newspaper and adds the most important and recent world news stories acquired from the wire services and international news services especially the BBC and CNN, as brief headlines under the category of *"The World This Morning."* The online editor at work in the morning usually finishes by 10 a.m. It is worth noting that no online staff members attend the daily news budget meetings; they rely instead on what is already published in the newspaper to determine and select the online news.

In contrast, the *Al-Wafd* site has two full time online journalists and two data-entry members. These online editors were hired specifically for the web site duties. However, they have prior newspaper experience (15 years for the manager of the online service and 10 years for the other online editor). They are technologically sophisticated, enthusiastic, and flexible staff, not locked into rigid roles. *Al-Wafd* site's daily routine follows that of the print newspaper. The morning-shift online editor starts selecting news stories for the next day right after the pagination of each print-newspaper page. This editor gets the text of the pages from the computer server and then changes the photos to a format suitable for the screen. Sometimes data-entry staffers help in carrying out these steps. Finishing the selection process, the editor works with a data-entry member on translating news pages into HTML language. Throughout the day, the online editor continuously checks the wire services and adds new headlines about major world events to the *animated headline panel*. This editor attends the daily news meeting to deliver a report about the news site developments and readers' inputs.

The evening-shift online editor selects news stories from the second set of pages (the front page, national news, crime and sport pages). Going through the same processes of pulling, reformatting and encoding texts and photos, this editor along with a data-entry staff member put the whole site online at 11 p.m., hours before the distribution of the paper the next morning. *Al-Wafd* news site is thus published once every day with limited modifications the next day. On some occasions, when the newspaper prints a second edition, the news site goes through substantial modifications to reflect the newspaper. Online editors do their job in a place adjacent to the print-production computer room,

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which is physically approximate to the newsroom. More often than not, online editors themselves do the technical steps required for transferring the paper-based news to the online environment. Day-to-day news decisions are made independently by online editors. The significant decisions about enhancement of the site, however, are approved by the editorial board of the newspaper.

The work routines and the environment in which gate-keeping takes place indicate that news decision-making processes are much more streamlined than their counterparts in traditional news media. News items in traditional news work face a number of gates on their way to readers, and passing through one gate does not guarantee publishing; in online news work, news stories have only to pass through one gate before being published. Similarly, while gate-keeping in traditional news media, as earlier studies (e.g. Berkowitz, 1990) asserts, is a group process; news decision-making, therefore, is shaped by group dynamics, online news decisions are controlled only by one editor.

Moreover, the news selections of *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd* are also the outcome of organizational policies and constraints on the one hand, and journalists' values and perceptions of the online product and audiences on the other. As interviews revealed, both *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd* editors identify their online services as electronic versions of their papers. They emphasize their organizations' desires for continuity between the online and print news products, and thus the subordinate position of the online services. As a result, the online editors perform a "second-level" gate-keeping, generally constrained by the materials already published in the newspapers. Further, the institutional policies governing the sites often force the online editors to follow the news judgments of the

print papers. Thus, online editors do not appear to have substantial gate-keeping autonomy. As one online editor at *Al-Ahram* notes:

> Generally, I have to take the main story of each page, and put them in the lead cells of the online pages. In most cases, we use the second and the third stories in the next two cells, especially in the front page [home page] of *Al-Ahram* ... but there are some exceptions. Apart from the main three cells, there's no directive from the top... I mean we are free to choose what goes into the [web] pages (An *Al-Ahram* online editor, personal communication, 2002).

However, there seems to be different interpretations of institutional policies. One online editor in *Al-Ahram* points out:

> I am generally committed to the editorial line of the newspaper, but I am totally free to reprioritize the news stories. I am also free to create a new mix of these stories... Sometimes, I pick up stories from different pages and put them under one [online] section. Sometimes, I get some stories from local or foreign news pages and put them in the front. Even from the front page, I am only committed to take the head story (An *Al-Ahram* online editor, personal communication, 2002).

In general, *Al-Wafd* online editors report a higher degree of autonomy and more flexible institutional policies, allowing them to make substantial changes in categorizing and prioritizing news stories and even changing the main stories on each page. As one online editor notes,

> The editorial policy of the Internet site is very flexible. Generally, I try to reflect the newspaper. However, I have complete freedom to reorganize the materials in accordance with what I consider more important to Internet users. Sometimes, I completely ignore the head story of the newspaper's front page or I put it in a secondary place in the home page or in the local news section. I am also free to rearrange news stories in different sections... you know, the text of the newspaper is always there. But what I choose to focus on for the site are stories on topics that are important and of interest to our audience (An *Al-Wafd* online editor, personal communication, 2002).

Furthermore, *Al-Ahram* limits the number of news stories published online, which should not exceed 60 percent of the print content. The limit in *Al-Wafd* is about 50 percent. More importantly, *Al-Ahram* regards some news categories as inappropriate for online publishing. Crime news is the most significant example. The supervisor of the online service explained the exclusion of this category of news in terms of the "ethical tendency of the conservative Egyptian culture" and the conviction that "publishing crime news [on a global scale] jeopardizes the image of the country" (Salama, personal communication, 2002). On the contrary, *Al-Wafd* does not exclude any news categories.

Apart from the organizational policies and constraints, the gate-keeping process is influenced by online journalists' values and perceptions. In general, online journalists agree that audience needs are the main value that governs their news selection. As one online editor notes, "the importance of the story and its relevance to the audience is the major criterion. You have to constantly ask yourself: Is this story important? Is it relevant to your audience? Will they be interested in knowing that story? Does it make sense to them?" (An *Al-Ahram* online editor, personal communication, 2002). While many studies show that news producers have little knowledge about their audiences they claim to serve (e.g. Gans, 1980), the capacity of the Internet to track its users seems to refine producers' images of their audiences, and, therefore, guide them through the news selection process. As *Al-Ahram* online editors assert, the audience of their site is mainly diasporic Egyptians, who are interested in national news that gives them a general picture of Egypt. New political and economic policies that affect these audiences such as new rules of immigration and citizenship, investment opportunities, and Egyptian employment abroad

are of great interest to that audience. *Al-Ahram* online editors also know that one of their most popular pages is the Sports page, and therefore they take great care with it, providing more sports news stories, catering to different audience interests. Furthermore, they indicate that readers often express their interests in some topics and issues via E-mail. As one online editor points out, "we get a lot of emails from the readers... many of them ask to publish some news categories, for example Egyptian movie and cinema news... some request additional information: more details about government actions, economic policies and so on" (An *Al-Ahram* online editor, personal communication, 2002).

Al-Wafd editors share the interest of *Al-Ahram* editors in presenting national news, particularly about political and economic issues, which will pique the curiosity of readers inside and outside Egypt. They also draw heavily from the Sport and Crime sections, which they rate as popular online pages that attract a large proportion of their audience. In addition, because of their emphasis on interaction with readers, the online editors also tend to pick up stories with which readers will likely interact. One *Al-Wafd* online editor points out, "...the reader comes to our site also to discuss and comment on the issues of interest to him. We should take that into account.... Government plans and policies, the party [Al-Wafd] programs and campaigns, corruption issues and others create a hot debate in our forum... and consequently easily find their way to the site" (An *Al-Wafd* online editor, personal communication, 2002).

Yet, apart from this general knowledge of the audience's interests, and unless the producers conduct extensive research that is largely facilitated by the interactivity of the Internet medium itself, the image of the audiences remains incomplete. For instance,

when online journalists were asked about their audience profile, they tended to portray the audience based on their ideas about who was online. They assume that their audience is relatively young (between 20 and 40 years old), highly educated, middle- to upper-class males. These assumptions, however, do not necessarily correspond to reality. But they have significant implications on news selection. With these demographic characteristics of the audience in mind, the online editors tend to select news articles relevant to youth, and to assume that their readers have great interest in technology and computers. As one of *Al-Wafd* online editors notes,

> Our reader is a member of the information and communication revolution club... normally he will be interested in technology news, and willing to catch up with what is new in this world, so if we've got anything that is running about technology, the Internet, computer hardware and software, I try to get that story out on the front (An *Al-Wafd* online editor, personal communication, 2002).

Thus, because *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd* have not conducted any surveys of their audiences, they draw their audiences' profile in a broad strokes, relying on their personal perceptions about Internet users.

In the news selection process, the subjectivity of the producers also comes through. One online editor in *Al-Ahram* mentioned, "Sometimes while I am choosing the news, I ask myself if I were living abroad, would I be interested to know this news about Egypt? Would this news inform me about the important events in my homeland? Would it affect my life there?" (An *Al-Ahram* online editor, personal communication, 2002) In some cases, the online journalists thus assume that the audience's interests, values and feelings are similar to their own. In gate-keeping literature, many scholars refer to this practice by which the journalists act as a kind of pre-audience for their audience. Gieber

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(1963) calls those journalists " 'projective' gatekeepers who follow their own personal judgments, assuming that the audience will concur." Gieber describes another group of journalists, "introjective" gatekeepers, who internalize the interests and values of their audience; their gate-keeping decisions are influenced by their audience's values (cited in Shoemaker, 1991, p. 62). In the last analysis, however, the online environment allows news producers to be reasonably knowledgeable about the concerns and interests of their audiences, and thus can potentially minimize the impact of journalists' subjectivity on gate-keeping decisions.

To sum up, news production on the *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd* sites is a technologically- driven process, heavily dependent on the print newspaper. Online editors repurpose content instead of providing tailor-made news exclusively for the Internet. News selection is a streamlined process performed by one editor under the pressure of artificial deadlines which are geared to newspaper practices regardless of their relevance to the online world. In many ways, gate-keeping is structured by organizational policies and constraints that provide a general framework within which the online editors do their jobs. This process is secondarily informed by the audiences' general interests. Since using the Internet leaves tracks that are easily recorded, audience patterns of consumption, choice, and reaction are captured and logged. These data serve as an input in the news selection process. Beyond this, online editors' perceptions of what is important and relevant to the audience are another criterion of importance in gate-keeping. Generally, national news stories about public affairs, particularly politics and economics, sports and technology, occupy a prominent space in the news sites of both organizations.

Conclusion: One Medium, Two Paradigms

The Internet clearly holds great potential for the news industry in terms of the production, dissemination, and consumption of the news. In many ways, the communication culture of the medium, which is built around interactivity, multimedia, and hypertextuality, challenges the deeply rooted traditions of conventional news media, promising to create an open, democratic communication milieu. However, the realization of these promises is dependent on how news organizations perceive and use this new medium. Evidence from interviews with the online editors of *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd* clearly reveals a diversity of approaches to the Internet medium. Although it is too early to speak of finalized models of online news, as the use of the medium is still in its infancy, one can outline two different paradigms that govern *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd* online news, shaping the content and format of these services.

The first approach is exemplified by the *Al-Ahram* organization. Mainly, it is a content-based paradigm that focuses on presenting and improving editorial content through the use of hyperlinks and multimedia, offering little in the way of interactive communication to readers. Such an approach guarantees that the flow of information is one-way, and control remains in the hands of the organizational gatekeepers. As a result, this paradigm cannot be described as fundamentally different from the conventional print or broadcasting media model in its approach to relationships with readers. The only interactive opportunity for users is an E-mail address, to which comments or requests for additional information can be sent. Rafaeli (1988) distinction between "interactive" and "quasi-interactive" or "reactive" communication is an

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interesting way to assess the feedback possibilities offered at the *Al-Ahram* site.

According to Rafaeli,

> Interactivity requires that communicants respond to each other. But the content of the response may have one or two forms: regular response— reaction to previous messages—or response—which, itself, acknowledges prior responses. The conditions for full interactivity are fulfilled when later states in a message sequence depend on the reaction in early transactions, as well as in the content exchanges. A situation or medium remains quasi-interactive when the latter type of response is absent (1988, pp. 118-119).

According to such a distinction, even though the *Al-Ahram* online site allows for feedback, comments, and requests from audiences, it cannot be considered fully interactive. The lack of user-to-user interactivity—a genuine involvement of readers in social interaction with content producers and amongst each other—nullifies a significant dimension of the interactivity of the Internet. Newhagen, in his dialogue with Rafaeli, *Why Communication Researchers Should Study the Internet* (1996), argues that the real promise of the Internet as a communication technology resides in its ability to support truly interactive communication, made possible by its parallel, distributed architecture. "If journalism does not come to grips with the impact these architectural differences have on the way people use information," he warns, "it may have trouble finding a home on the Net" (1996, p. 7).

The second approach, which is adopted by the *Al-Wafd* online service, is based on networked communication. The major focus of this approach is not how to augment news stories with hyperlinks and multimedia features, but rather how to utilize the Internet as an interlinked discussion and feedback platform—how to create an open, participatory space that allows users to share comments, ideas and suggestions without moderating or filtering interventions from the editors. What is attempted is to invite readers to contribute

to news stories in an open-publishing environment. As Henderson and Fernback (1998) comment, "Building an online newspaper is more than shoveling all the stories and press releases available into a WWW publication and hoping people will become regular readers. Publishing an online newspaper requires the nurturing and development of information, interaction, and community" (1998, p. 114). *Al-Wafd* understands this and has made use of the Internet by trying to build relationships with its readers. Although the interviews with the editors of the two organizations, *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd,* reveal that online journalists may be more preoccupied with their audiences than their counterparts in the traditional print and broadcast media, this preoccupation is much higher among *Al-Wafd* journalists. It expresses itself not only in the form of taking readers interests, needs and demands into account when selecting news stories, but also in the attentiveness to readers' responses to news stories—their postings and discussions in the interactive spaces adjacent to the content of news stories and in the online public forums, and in the perceived importance of interaction between journalists and readers.

These two distinct approaches are based on fundamentally different communications philosophies and reflect divergent strategies. However, the very newness of the medium means that the whole exercise of publishing Internet news sites is still in a state of flux. In this early—and experimental—stage, it is clear that both organizations have adopted different strategies: *Al-Ahram* pursues a content-based approach, while *Al-Wafd* opts for an audience-based approach. This divergence will have significant ramifications in making the Internet a more or less democratic medium. As Hacker puts it, "the more democratic a communication system, the more it will accommodate interactivity" (1996, p. 225).

Chapter 4

**Online News Content
And The Study of its Stylistic Features**

Many communications scholars contend that the unique characteristics of different

media not only offer distinctive communication modalities, but also structure the content

of the communication itself and shape the reader's experience. For instance, visual media

present a communicative modality that challenges the dominance of older verbal media,

endowing the content with different significance. As well, reader's interpretive experiences

are different with visual and verbal texts. New digital media, for their part, are able to

transcend the limitations of analog media. Commenting on the potential transformation of

news content on the Internet, media scholar John Pavlik (2001) argues that:

> No longer is news constrained by the technical limitations of analog
> media, whether print, television, or radio. Instead, all modalities of human
> communication are available for telling stories in the most compelling,
> interactive... and customized fashion possible. Certain constraints, of
> course, still apply, including newsroom traditions and training, as well as
> newsroom economics, and these may ultimately determine whether
> journalists fully utilize online capabilities to create better, more complete,
> and contextualized news reports. Nevertheless, the technology makes
> improved news content possible (2001, p. 17).

Similarly, Tony Feldman (1997) asserts that new genres of online publishing rely

on providing "not content in its old sense but a content-based experience" (1997, p. 154).

With the growing use of various communications-based services such as forums, bulletin

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boards and real-time chat rooms in web sites, a significant part of the online content is in fact contributed by users. Unlike the experience with older media, which for all but a tiny fraction of the population have been a one-way engagement of reading not writing, the online experience is two-way, allowing for the readers' involvement in the creation of the content (Levinson, 1999, p. 38). Furthermore, the dynamic nature of the Internet medium means that the content offering can change rapidly from moment to moment. It also allows for an "increasingly personalized content, and therefore offers a distinctive one-to-one experience rather than a shared, generic one" (Feldman, 1997, p. 155). In addition, the multimedia capacity of the Internet permits web sites to provide a hybrid of media texts that amount to much more than their constituent parts.

The online text thus has specific characteristics which are the product of the technological potential of the medium. These characteristics should be addressed before analyzing the content of the online news sites. Consequently, the first part of this chapter will explore the unique aspects of online texts. The second part will analyze online news content on two levels. First, the comparative analysis of the content of the online and print products of *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd* will focus on their similarities and differences in order to reveal the gate-keeping philosophies that govern online news production in the two organizations. It will reveal whether the online news products reflect the same content mix as their print counterparts, or whether they give their online readers alternative compilations of news stories, different news hierarchies, emphasis and angles, and thus present different views of Egyptian social events. Second, the analysis of the distinctive features of the online content of *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd* sites will focus on the

differential ways in which *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd* deploy the technological characteristics of the Internet and how this deployment shapes their online news content and distances the online news product from the print counterpart.

The Online Content: Distinctive Features

The basic properties of the Internet provide unique values that restructure the underlying content. It is true that the original content continues to exist in a recognizable form, however, as Feldman (1997) argues, on the Internet, "we cannot be satisfied with merely the old sense of the word 'content.' If we call such a Web site content-based, it must represent a new conception of content, governed largely by acknowledging that its uniqueness and power lies in delivering a compelling but varied and variegated experience to its users" (1997, p. 155). In general, there are four interrelated and overlapping characteristics, which constitute the distinctiveness of online content. These are intertextuality, multimodality, reader involvement, and dynamism. Each of these four characteristics will now be investigated in greater detail.

Intertextuality

One major characteristic of the online text that enhances its discursiveness and sets it apart from traditional text, is its explicit intertextuality. Unlike other analog text, the digital text offers the opportunity for immediate linkage to various virtual texts, allowing the reader to move from one text to another in a simple and effortless manner.

In principle, the notion of intertextuality is not new. It has always been a component of

literary and textual production and analysis. As Mitra and Cohen (1999) comment:

> Authors of texts do not usually work in a cultural vacuum, and thus, their
> work is almost always intertextual because of the way in which existing
> and past texts tend to impinge on new texts.... Analysts, critics, and
> scholars recognize this tendency in authors, and analysts are able to point
> toward textual characteristics that reflect a text's connections with other
> preceding texts.... [H]owever, there is a presumption that the
> intertextuality of the texts needs to be "teased" out of the text and that the
> intertextuality is not necessarily overt but is often embedded in the style
> and narrative of the texts. This presumption... disappears in the case of
> hypertext. For the WWW text, the intertextuality is not implicit or hidden.
> Rather, it is explicit and unambiguous, and the effectivity of hypertext
> often depends on its extent of intertextuality (1999, p.184).

Brian Ott and Cameron Walter (2000) note that intertextuality refers to various practices.

On the one hand, it refers to the interpretative practice unconsciously performed by the

audience in the process of meaning construction. On the other hand, it is a textual strategy

or stylistic device consciously employed by text producers, inviting the reader to make

specific associations between texts. Intertextuality thus describes "both the general

practice of decoding and a specific strategy of encoding" (2000, p. 430). Following this

distinction, the Internet can be considered the beginning of a truly networked intertextual

system that opens the text to the endless play of interpretative textuality, while also

featuring a web of texts strategically included by the producers to explicitly invite the

reader's attention. In such a seamless intertextuality, Mitra and Cohen (1999) argue "the

analyst is thus no longer attempting to ferret out the nature of the intertextuality but often

has to be more interested in the extent of the intertextuality" (1999, p. 184).

In many ways, the textual strategies of Internet hypertext challenge the way in

which texts are read. Traditional values, which determine and constrain texts, and the

very process of signification, are all affected. The Internet produces "a unique narrative" that calls for an interactive—not only active—reading process that delegates a higher degree of agency to the reader. As Jim Hall (2001) argues,

> Links [to other texts] radically affect the tone and meaning of a narrative. They can be used to explain or expand upon elements of the anchor text or to extend or redirect the narrative. Each one that is encountered by the reader forces a decision as to whether to follow the link or stay with the anchor text. The process insists that the reader thinks about the text in a way that print or broadcast texts do not. In creating their narratives readers will necessarily fragment the text and if the editor is to retain them it is important that there are links and structures in place which will consistently allow it to reconstitute to new formations (2001, p. 68-69).

In such an interactive reading process, the text not only has a wider polysemic potential, but also allows the reader to order the flow of the text. Unlike the traditional text, where the reader has little control over flow, from a text's finite beginning and end, the hypertext liberates the reader to "produce whatever text... [he/she] pleases, given the overt nonlinear connections the text provides" (Mitra and Cohen, 1999, p. 186).

In online news sites, hyperlinks present the reader with numerous options for wandering through the provided information. Some links can place the story in a much richer historical, political and cultural context. Other links connect the story to related stories, which have been reported or archived at the site. Still, others provide access to information beyond the domain of the news site itself and thus offer the reader an elaborate intertextual option—the option to explore other perspectives and viewpoints in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the news item. In this environment, Evans (1998) argues, "it is possible—indeed, likely—that no two users will pursue the same path and that no single user will pursue the same path twice" (1998, p.

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164). New media scholar, Eric Fredin (1997), considers hyperlinks the most substantial difference between electronic and ordinary news stories and claims that they represent a new form of "contextualized journalism" (1997, p. 1). Overall, explicit intertextuality is one of the most salient characteristics of Internet news texts, enriching the content and distancing them from traditional media texts.

Multimodality

The second characteristic of the Internet text is its capacity to offer a convergence of different kinds of representational strategies. Given the technological tools available to the author of Internet texts, it is possible to combine the written word, graphics, sound and video to produce a nonlinear text whose meaning is in fact the product of the synergy of its components. Feldman (1997) argues that the mere diversity of multimedia is enough to mark the Internet text as fundamentally different. "From the point of view of content development, ... it is possible to weave interactive experiences around a synthesis of all forms of media... creating something unique in terms of the values it delivers" (1997, p. 154). There appears to be considerable controversy surrounding the effectiveness of multimedia representations on users' processing and perception of information. Some researchers propose that information presented in multiple modalities has a stronger chance of "getting through" to viewers/readers, while others view such information as cognitively so complex that interpretive overload may occur (for a review of this debate, see Sundar, 2000). Although there are as yet no conclusions to the debate, it indicates that each individual modality enhances the overall meaning potential of Internet news stories.

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Despite their availability, the incorporation of multimedia capabilities into the online news environment is still limited. As John Pavlik (2001) points out,

> Unfortunately, online journalism has only slowly begun to incorporate many of these multimedia capabilities. There are several reasons for this. First, except for many television network-based sites, most online news operations (with a parent newspaper or other print operations) do not have extensive traditions in creating multimedia content; neither do they have a culture or set of resources to begin producing such multimedia content easily.... Second, some news operations tend to view online reporting as merely an extension of their existing activities, and if they are print based, they tend to not view video and audio as terribly relevant. Third, many operations do not have staff with multimedia capabilities and backgrounds and are likely to hire reporters similar to those who have worked for the parent print operations, where the emphasis is on the written word; graphics, images, audio, and video are not part of their training (2001, p. 5).

Overall, however, multimodality is a significant element in creating a more open text—one that is not constrained by using only single modalities.

Reader Involvement

The structural capacities of the Internet place the reader into a completely new relationship to the text from that imposed by traditional media. The role of the reader of traditional media texts has been conventionally described as that of a receiver, someone who reads the text in a relatively passive manner. Many critical scholars challenge this view, emphasizing the active role of the reader in the process of meaning construction. In confronting the media's texts, readers are empowered to create their own socially and politically contextualized interpretations (e.g. Hall, 1980, Fiske 1989). This critical approach, however, lends agency to the reader in the process of text consumption, not production. After all, traditional media produce their text mainly independently from the

readers who "have fairly limited opportunities to participate in the generation of mass media content, not to mention to discuss it with the journalistic and political elites" (Schultz, 2000, p. 206). The Internet, in contrast, empowers the reader to play a much more active role, one that transcends negotiating the meaning of the already produced text, by involving him/her in content creation.

The interactive nature of the Internet moves away from the one-way social communication model of the traditional media towards a two-way public exchange of information in which readers engage in the very process of content production. As readers contribute their critical readings publicly, they gain "an immediate sense of authorship and authority" and blur the producer/consumer roles through "an egalitarian model of communication, rather than [one] of top-down publishing" (Jones, 1997). Thus, the Internet allows for a flexible news content, the product of readers who negotiate with the content, comment on it, and join journalists and other readers in a more general discussion about news topics and issues.

In addition to this form of involvement in news content creation, there are also two other types of reader engagement that influence the content, albeit in a very different way. First, since the digital environment of the Internet has limitless storage capacity, it allows web producers to archive older material, making for multiple layers of content. This archiving capacity permits the news sites reader to consult earlier information and arguments. As a result, news stories are placed in a broader historical context in ways that were previously difficult to undertake. As Jim Hall (2001) points out:

> Before the web, newspaper archives were largely the musty domain of
> professional researchers and journalism students. Journalism was, by

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definition, current. The general accessibility of archives has radically extended the shelf life of journalism, with older stories now regularly cited to provide context for more current ones. With regard to how meaning is made of complex issues encountered in the news, this departure can be understood as a readiness by online news consumers to engage with the underlying issues and contexts of the news that was not apparent in, or even possible for, print consumers. One of the emergent qualities of online news, determined in part by the depth of readily accessible online archives, seems to be the possibility of understanding news stories as the manifest outcomes of larger economic, social and cultural issues rather than ephemeral and unconnected media spectacles (2001, p. 78).

Thus, when readers retrieve related background information, relevant articles and even sound and video from the archive, they expand the boundaries of current news events, creating a news context other than the one prescribed by the original content producers. Ultimately, this process of restructuring the context easily overrides the constraints of the isolated story, creating several meaningful links across news events. This process, while reducing the authorial control of journalists, also enriches the meaning potential of the online content, which in some sense is "created by the consumer in the process of being consumed" (Evans, 1998, p. 162).

Second, Internet technology gives the user greater control over the flow of the content, theoretically allowing every single user to specify the topics of interest to him/her and to create a customized news product. While the linear presentation of news in traditional media exposes the reader to various topics and issues, the parallel presentation mode of online news permits the reader to filter out large segments of the content, creating personalized information environments. Commenting on the customization potential of the new digital media, Feldman (1997) states that:

> All existing content industries—broadcasting, music, film, [and] publishing—are based on a generic model of distribution. In other words, their business

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is creating a single product and either replicating it... or transmitting it identically.... In all these cases, the creators of the content products are driven by creative and commercial models, which are tailored to the generic rather than the customized. In the digital domain, this generic model can persist... but more importantly it can be disposed of entirely. To some extent, interactivity means every user can enjoy a slightly different content experience depending on how they choose to interact with a product but, more fundamentally, it means that information or entertainment experiences can be exactly tailored to individual needs and can be accessed when the user wants those experiences. In this situation, the substance of the content experience is determined more by the user than the supplier and a massive shift takes place in the balance of power between the two (1997, p. 155).

Some researchers view this development negatively because it fragments the news audience. Others believe that the personalization of online news retrieval "encourages greater depth of exposure to particular topics," bearing in mind that the Internet is not the only outlet that audiences rely on to get their news and information (Althaus and Tewksbury, 2002, p. 198). What is more important is that customizable news services offer a new content experience, different from the shared collective one offered by the traditional media. The Internet allows users to tailor the news to their individual needs and life situations, completely bypassing large flows of news content. This is what makes some media scholars call the Internet "the first truly personalized mass medium" (Jones, 1999, p. 18). Overall, the different forms of reader involvement in the online news environment shift control over the social communication experience from the producer to the audience member.

Dynamism

The fourth characteristic of online content is its dynamic nature. As the Internet architecture allows for news to be published in real time with minimal delay, online

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content is highly fluid. Unlike the static content of print and most broadcast news media, which is structured according to a series of deadlines to be delivered at a certain point in time and updated only several hours later, online content is not constrained by deadlines, and can be changed, corrected and updated continuously. The continuous news cycle of the online environment turns any news article, Giussani (1997) argues, into "a *story in progress*,... allowing for constant re-composition... [and] never-ending restructuring" (1997). As new information becomes available it can be used easily and quickly to update existing stories or break new ones. Of course, we cannot overlook the fact that updating online content depends upon available resources, work practices at the site, and the company's online news conceptions. Yet, when and whether the technological capacities are utilized still depends on journalists' skills and company's attitudes.

The above suggests that the technological characteristics of the Internet are able to reshape content in a profound way. And some new media scholars believe that, these technologies will result in "new story-telling techniques that engage the audience in more contextualized and networked news reporting. This interactive storytelling embraces a wider range of communication modalities... [and] offers possibilities for extraordinary customization and heightened audience involvement" (Pavlik, 2001, p. 3). Despite this promise, new features of digital content remain technological possibilities, and are not yet commonplace on many news sites. Furthermore, several news sites that employ these technological characteristics expand the use of certain features while scaling back on others. Analysis of the actual utilization of these features, therefore, remains the yardstick to measure how the online news content of specific sites is constructed.

Gate-keeping Philosophies at Al-Ahram and Al-Wafd

Al-Ahram and *Al-Wafd* online products mainly used the newspaper metaphor as the fundamental structural model. The organization of their content followed the traditional departmentalization of the paper; there was a front page/home page featuring the top stories of the day as the entry point into the system, beyond that there were a number of different news and opinion sections. The *Al-Ahram* site presented a total of 13 daily sections (10 news sections: Local News, Arab News, World News, Correspondents' Reports, Reportage, Economy, Sports, Culture and Arts, Woman and Child, and *Al-Ahram*'s Files; and, 3 editorial and opinion sections: Opinions, Writers' Articles, and Columns) and one weekly section (the Friday Supplement). The *Al-Wafd* site published 9 daily sections (6 news sections: Local News, Arab and International News, Economy, Crime, Sports, and Reportage; and 3 editorial and opinion sections: Opinions, Columns, and The Last Page) and one weekly section (The Sparrow—a political criticism section). Despite the similarity to the organization of newspapers, the online products were structured in such a way as to flatten the newspaper hierarchy. The sports section, for instance, was neither at the 'back' of the site nor was it at a deeper level than the international news section. Thus, while both sites assumed that users appreciate the typical newspaper organizational model for finding information, their structure offered users more freedom than the print counterparts to determine what they would read and in which order.

Analysis of the print and online products of both organizations revealed that the online content did not include all news sections of the papers. The site of *Al-Ahram* did

not include various weekly sections (omitted sections included Agriculture Reports, Environment, Oil and Energy, Tourism and Travel, Market, Automobile World, Investment and Real Estate, Resources and Development, Medicine and Health, Books, Parliament and Partisan Reports, Youth and Education, and Arab Sports). As online editors of *Al-Ahram* said in interviews, the reason for excluding these weekly sections was that most were highly commercialized, mainly offering "paid content" or "editorial advertisements". Other weekly sections (e.g. Parliament and Partisan Reports, Youth and Education, Arab Sports) partly overlapped with Local News and Sports sections already presented on the site. One editor explained, "in the online environment, it would be confusing to publish two sections that deal with the same topic, the daily Sports section and the weekly Arab Sports, for instance" (An *Al-Ahram* online editor, personal communication, 2002). Also, four daily sections were not included on the site: Crime, Radio and Television, Governorate News, and Religion. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Crime section was excluded so as not to present a negative image of Egyptian society abroad. The sections about radio and television programs and the governorates are primarily of local interest and were considered by *Al-Ahram* online editors irrelevant to the site's target audience—communities of Egyptians living abroad. The religion section was presented once a week on the Internet as part of the Friday Supplement.

Similarly, the site of *Al-Wafd* excluded the weekly sections (Culture, Arts, Religion, Varity, Profiles, and Readings), as well as two daily sections: (Outside Cairo and Radio and Television). *Al-Wafd* online editors explained these exclusions by saying that online readers are more interested in news and current events than in weekly

coverage and the articles published in these sections. Since Internet users in Egypt mainly resided in the capital, Cairo, and large urban centers, Outside Cairo section (news stories about smaller governorates) was considered irrelevant to them. The site of *Al-Wafd* included one section that did not appear in the newspaper; this section displayed breaking news stories acquired from international news agencies.

Thus, certain parts of the paper did not find their way into the online platform. Commercial sections and local content about rural governorates were the most prominent examples. Furthermore, the status of the Internet as a medium of instantaneous communication seemed to push the producers to focus on the timely news sections. The weekly sections of the paper—primarily composed of timeless items—were, therefore, relegated to a secondary position, if not excluded altogether. However, two weekly sections, the *Friday Supplement* in *Al-Ahram* and the *Sparrow* in *Al-Wafd* that were of major symbolic importance to both organizations were exceptions to the rule of timeliness. Since the 1960s, *Al-Ahram* has published the *Friday Supplement* on a weekly basis, which has a high reputation among *Al-Ahram* readers because of its varied and extensive coverage of different aspects of Egyptian social and cultural life. This weekly section is in fact so successful that the distribution of the Friday issue of *Al-Ahram* is 30% higher than on other days. Similarly, the weekly section of *Al-Wafd*, the *Sparrow*, won a sizeable readership because it publishes confidential items obtained by clandestine means, exposing wrongdoings in official circles and criticizing the government. News and editorial sections that appear in *both* the print and online products of *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd* will be the focus of the subsequent analysis.

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Story Totals, Print and Online

Al-Ahram and *Al-Wafd* ran almost twice as many stories in their newspapers than on the Internet. Overall, 2,041 items appeared in print compared with 1,191 stories online during the seven days of the study. *Al-Ahram* published 1,176 stories in its paper, compared with 734 in the online product. *Al-Wafd* newspaper ran 865 stories, compared with 457 on the site.

Table 4.1: The Distribution of News & Editorial Materials in *Al-Ahram*
Print and Online Products

News & Editorial Sections	Stories/ Articles		
	Print	**Online**	**Online as % of Print**
The Front Page	134	106	79
Local News	180	68	38
Arab News	112	72	64
World News	121	71	59
Foreign Correspondents' Reports	44	18	41
Reportage (internally produced)	41	36	88
Economy	80	48	60
Sports	143	75	52
Culture and Arts	104	50	48
Woman and Child	32	26	81
Al-Ahram Files	22	21	95
Opinion	70	55	79
Writers	22	20	91
Columns	46	46	100
Friday Supplement	25	22	88
Total	**1176**	**734**	**62**

Table 4.1 shows the distribution of articles in various print news and editorial sections in the *Al-Ahram* newspaper versus online news and editorial sections on the *Al-Ahram* web site. The figures show that relative to print items, there are 62% as many items online on *Al-Ahram*. The story counts of different sections indicate that the ratio of online content to print content is not constant across the sections. The opinion pieces are almost all transported from the print product to the online platform. On average, 90% of all opinion pieces in *Al-Ahram* were published online. Similarly, the weekly section, the *Friday Supplement*, is overrepresented online; 88% of all its materials are transported to the online product. Looking at other online sections, the home page, the Reportage, *Al-Ahram*'s Files and the Woman and Child sections are overrepresented, with a large number of print stories transported online. The Economy, Arab News, and World News sections approach the standard ratio (62%) of online content to print content. Other news sections are underrepresented online, with an average of 42% of print stories transported to the online product.

Table 4.2: The Distribution of News & Editorial Materials in *Al-Wafd* Print and Online Products

News & Editorial Sections	Stories/ Articles		
	Print	Online	Online as % of Print
The Front Page	123	21	17
Local News	110	64	58
Arab & International News	87	62	71
Reportage	39	34	87

Economy	71	36	51
Sports	173	50	29
Crime	130	63	49
Opinion	58	53	91
Columns	49	49	100
The Last Page	7	7	100
The Sparrow	18	18	100
Total	**865**	**457**	**53**

Table 4.2 shows the distribution of articles in the print versus online news and editorial

sections in *Al-Wafd*. The figures show that relative to print items, there are 53% as many

items online on *Al-Wafd*. The online product of *Al-Wafd* shows the same tendency to publish

almost all opinion pieces online. On average, 97% of all print opinion pieces in *Al-Wafd* are

transferred to the online site. The weekly section, the *Sparrow,* is completely published

online. Other news sections show a greater discrepancy. While the Arab & International

News and the Reportage online sections present a relatively high percentage of the print

stories, the home page and Sports section show a low percentage of publication (17% and

29% respectively). Unlike *Al-Ahram*, *Al-Wafd* opts for providing only the most important

stories of the day on its home page, and consequently transferred a smaller number of

print stories to its site. Other online news sections generally approach the standard ratio

(53%) of online content to print content in *Al-Wafd*. These figures give some early

indication about the classification of online content and the gate-keeping process in terms

of the number of news inputs and outputs, the subsequent comparative analysis of online

content and print content will shed more light on the gate-keeping process and the major characteristics of online content.

Story Topics

A second area of inquiry into the differences between print and online content focuses on the topics of news stories.

**Table 4.3: The Distribution of Story Topics in *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd*
Print and Online Products**

Story Topic	Al-Ahram				Al-Wafd			
	Print		Online		Print		Online	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Government/Politics	203	17	164	22	143	17	98	21
Economy/ Business	171	15	118	16	119	14	77	17
Union/Labor	34	3	20	3	35	4	24	5
War/Defense/Terrorism	139	12	108	15	62	7	47	10
Sub-Totals	**547**	**47**	**410**	**56**	**359**	**42**	**246**	**53**
Sports	155	13	84	11	183	21	53	12
Crime	14	1	4	1	161	19	72	16
Disaster/Accident	23	2	13	2	21	2	9	2
Human Interest	50	4	34	5	10	1	4	1
Culture/Arts	156	13	83	11	31	4	22	5
Education	46	4	26	3	33	4	21	5
Health	65	6	39	5	18	2	10	2
Science/Technology	23	2	12	2	13	1	9	2

Energy/Environment	35	3	14	2	14	2	6	1
Religion	14	1	10	1	2	-*	2	-*
Miscellaneous	48	4	5	1	20	2	3	1
Sub-Totals	**629**	**53**	**324**	**44**	**506**	**58**	**211**	**47**
Totals	**1176**	**100**	**734**	**100**	**865**	**100**	**457**	**100**

* The percentage of this category is less than .5.

Table 4.3 shows the distribution of different topics in the print and online products. It indicates that the online content in both organizations is hard news oriented, focusing on political, economic, labor, and war issues. More than one-half of all online content also deals with this category of news. The comparison between the online and print products confirms that the online products skew their content more towards hard news. While the hard news category occupies 47% of the *Al-Ahram* print content, it is 56% of all online material. Similarly, *Al-Wafd* devotes 42% of its print content to hard news and 53% of its online content. Looking at the newspaper and the online product individually puts more emphasis on the hard news orientation of the online content. Although the hard news category occupied a fairly high percentage of both papers' contents (47% in *Al-Ahram* newspaper and 42% in *Al-Wafd* newspaper), this percentage would quickly decrease if weekly sections that appeared only in the print product were to be added, since most of these sections are soft news oriented. On the contrary, the percentage of hard news in the online products (56% in *Al-Ahram* and 53% in *Al-Wafd*) remains virtually unchanged. All other news topics, including sports, crime, disasters, human interest, culture, education, health, science, environment, and religion represent less than one-half of the online content.

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Of all news topics that ran online, the government and political issues represented the greatest percentage (22% in *Al-Ahram* and 21% in *Al-Wafd*). This indicates a bias towards political topics in the online platform. An even more dramatic statement can be made by looking at the total number of political stories that ran in the print and online products. Of the 346 total political stories that appeared in the print products of both organizations (203 in *Al-Ahram* and 143 in *Al-Wafd*), 262 stories were published online, constituting 76%. Furthermore, political news stories dominated the sites' home pages, the entry points into the online products. This was particularly the case for *Al-Wafd*. Unlike the front page of the *Al-Wafd* newspaper, which tries to strike a balance between politics and other topics such as economics, culture, sports and crime, devoting 35% to 40% of the print front page space to political news, the online front page focuses overwhelmingly on political news, representing more than two-thirds of all stories during the study period.

Economic news was the second most important focus, providing about 17% of all stories. Combined, political and economic news represented almost 40% of all online stories. The qualitative analysis of online political and economic news stories, particularly those with a local or national focus, revealed a significant difference in gate-keeping dynamics. By comparing the news that passed the online gate with other print news that failed to appear on the sites, it became clear that the online medium accentuated the political biases of both organizations. For instance, although *Al-Ahram*, the government newspaper, published some reports that criticized the political and economic performance of the government, these reports often failed to pass the online gate. Reports about

obstacles that hindered economic growth in Egypt and about the failure of the government to attract foreign investment were examples of stories that did not make it online. On the contrary, the delicate balance that the *Al-Wafd* newspaper tries to strike between opposing and endorsing government policies, disappeared from the online platform. The major focus, instead, was on presenting the oppositional stance of *Al-Wafd* as a political party and as a partisan, non-governmental news organization. In the Internet product, the self-image of the news organization, its nature as either official or opposition, and the impression it wishes to project to the outside world seems to determine how the gate-keeping process is handled.

Of other story topics published online, sports was a high usage category for both organizations (11% in *Al-Ahram* and 12% in *Al-Wafd*). Crime in *Al-Wafd* (16%) and culture/arts in *Al-Ahram* (11%) also occupied prominent places. Other topics formed a small percentage (between 1% and 5% of online content). It is also worth noting that the miscellaneous category (a total of 48 stories in the *Al-Ahram* newspaper and 20 stories in *Al-Wafd* newspaper) consisted mostly of protocol news about the receptions of the president and government officials or Al-Wafd party leaders. These were given far less coverage in the online versions.

Story Focuses

The story focus—whether it is local, national, regional, or international—constitutes the third area of inquiry.

**Table 4.4: The Distribution of Story Focus in *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd*
Print and Online Products**

Story Focus	Al-Ahram				Al-Wafd			
	Print		Online		Print		Online	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Local	63	5	17	2	171	19	68	14
National	635	50	489	61	460	50	296	60
Regional	273	22	137	17	147	16	76	15
International	288	23	159	20	139	15	57	11
Totals*	**1259**	**100**	**802**	**100**	**917**	**100**	**497**	**100**

* The total number of story focus distributions is higher than the total number of stories published in print or online because some stories had dual focuses.

Table 4.4 shows that in news sections that appeared in both the print and online products, the total daily package devoted about 50% of both organizations' print products to national news. International news (23%) came in second place in the *Al-Ahram* newspaper, followed by regional news (22%), and then local news (5%). In the *Al-Wafd* newspaper, local stories (most of them were crime stories) occupied the second place (19%), followed by regional news (16%) and international news (15%). While this order did not change dramatically online (the only exception was a switch in the local and regional news placements in *Al-Wafd*), the major difference was the overrepresentation of national news items online.

Table 4.5: National and Non-National Stories in the Print and Online Products of both Organizations

Story Focus	Print		Online		Online as % of Print
	No	%	No	%	%
National	1095	50	785	60	72
Non-National	1081	50	514	40	48
Totals	**2176**	**100**	**1299**	**100**	**60**

Table 4.5 shows that of all stories that ran online in *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd*, 60% were national items; the percentage of national stories in print was 50%. Looking at the ratio of online national stories to those in print offers insight into the relative importance of this change. The online products used a total of 785 national stories, 72% of the 1095 used in print. In contrast, 514 non-national stories ran online, 48% of the 1081 that appeared in print. Of all the stories that were published in newspapers but excluded from the online products, 65% were non-national stories. Overall, while the majority of national stories appearing in print were transported into the online product, a majority of local, regional and international stories were not.

The underrepresentation of regional and international stories online and the overrepresentation of national news items indicates a discrepancy between the nature of the Internet as a global medium, and the focuses of news stories chosen for that platform. With the proliferation of other online sources that provide up-to-the-minute coverage of regional and international news and the numerous web sites that present first-hand reporting of world events, *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd* responded by focusing more on

national events, providing what other sources cannot offer. The localization of the online news content thus seems to be a way of finding a particular niche in the global Internet. The decrease of local news stories about governorates, however, can be explained, as mentioned before, in light of the interests of the target audiences and the distribution of Internet access in Egyptian society.

Looking at the excluded stories also offers more detail about differences between the print and online content. Of all excluded "local" stories, 88% were stories about governorates other than Cairo, the capital, or the two other major cities, Alexandria and Al-Giza. Online news thus accentuates the Egyptian print media's lack of interest in the country's unprivileged hinterlands. Also, with a limited daily package of regional and international news and a dominant focus on political topics, the online products eliminate many other significant stories, among them World market reports, regional and international trade news, Arab and international cultural and sports news. In conclusion, although online products do contain a mix of national and non-national stories, they do not reflect the full range of news content available in print, and they diverge primarily in eliminating non-national stories. It is worth noting, however, that the *Al-Wafd* online product gave more play to Arab (regional) news stories than to international news, while international news was given greater emphasis than Arab news by *Al-Ahram*.

Story Origins

Beyond the topic and focus of the story, the analysis of story sources offers additional insight into the differences between the print and online products.

Table 4.6: The Distribution of Story Origin in *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd* Print and Online Products

Story Origin	Al-Ahram				Al-Wafd			
	Print		Online		Print		Online	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Staff Members	709	60	536	73	463	54	302	66
National & International News Services	221	19	94	13	119	14	40	9
Outside Writers	47	4	36	5	67	8	60	13
Multiple Origins	38	3	21	3	23	2	7	2
No Byline	161	14	47	6	193	22	48	10
Totals	**1176**	**100**	**734**	**100**	**865**	**100**	**457**	**100**

Table 4.6 shows that staff members provided 709 (60%) of the print stories in *Al-Ahram* and 463 (54%) in *Al-Wafd*. These percentages increased online: 536 (73%) of the online stories in *Al-Ahram* and 302 (66%) in *Al-Wafd* were covered by staffers. National and international news services were the source of 221 (19%) of the print stories in *Al-Ahram* and 119 (14%) in *Al-Wafd*. The share of news services stories decreased online: 94 (13%) stories in *Al-Ahram* and 40 (9%) in *Al-Wafd*. Although there is no dramatic difference between print and online stories of multiple origins, the table shows an increase in the percentage of online items by outside writers. Since both organizations were keen to transport almost all opinion materials from the print to the online platform, outside writers who provided a large proportion of these materials were overrepresented. The figures also indicate that the number of stories that had no by-line (161 in *Al-Ahram* and 193 in *Al-Wafd*) diminished substantially online. There were only 47 of those in *Al-Ahram* and 48 in *Al-Wafd*.

Table 4.7: Stories Written by Staff Members and Non-Staffers in the Print and Online Products of both Organizations

Story Origin	Print		Online		Online as % of Print
	No	%	No	%	%
Staff Members*	1233	59	866	71	70
Non-Staff*	866	41	353	29	41
Totals**	2099	100	1299	100	58

* Stories with multiple origins (covered by staffers and a nonstaff source) are included in both staff and non-staff categories.

** The total number of stories is higher than the original number of all stories published in print and online due to the double counting of multiple origin stories

Overall, the figures show a significant increase in the percentage of online stories by staff members. As table 4.7 shows, among the online stories, 866 (71%) were by staffers, either alone or in combination with a wire service report. Among the print stories, 1,233 (59%) were by staffers. This difference between the staff origins of print and online stories is further confirmed by the fact that 70% of all print stories written by staff members were published online, whereas only 41% of non-staff press stories were used online. Further, when online stories were considered separately, it became clear that online content was predominantly staff-generated with a ratio of 71 staff stories to every 29 by non-staff. This indicates a common desire of both news organizations to inform the worldwide audience about significant national and international events from their own perspectives. This tendency was also confirmed by looking at the Arab and international news sections, which were heavily dependent on wire services. While both organizations transported less than half of the printed Arab and international stories reported by wire services to their online products, they transported all the stories produced by their own

correspondents. Therefore, even when covering international events, online products were more inclined to give the audience their own version of news, which may be different from what other Internet news sites are offering.

Story Content Alterations

Of the 1,191 stories that ran online, just 17, or 1%, appeared only on the web and not in print. In *Al-Ahram*, 10 stories, or 1% of the 734 online items, did not appear in any of the three editions of the newspaper. *Al-Wafd* published 7 items, or 2% of the 457 online stories, only on the web site. The online editors of both organizations insisted that they used only the materials published in the newspapers for their online products, but the above figures prove that this was not the case. Since there was no evidence that either organization created news content specifically for their web sites, these items must have been produced originally for the print products. The same version of 1,154 stories ran in both the print and online products of both organizations. Alterations were, however made to some online stories: 162 (22%) online stories in *Al-Ahram* and 127 (28%) in *Al-Wafd* had different or shortened headlines. Generally, the changes in story headlines did not alter the overall meaning of these headlines.

Sixty-nine stories (9%) in *Al-Ahram* and 37 (8%) in *Al-Wafd* included more paragraphs (mostly one or two paragraphs). Changes in online story length indicated a significant difference between the print and online media. Newspapers have tight spatial constraints, and stories are frequently cut to fit their assigned spaces. Therefore, readers often fail to receive all of the story detail, or they may lack appropriate background information. In

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contrast, the online medium has an almost infinite news hole and, therefore, stories can run completely; nothing need ever be cut. Alterations in story narration and overall tone were generally minor. Only 17 stories in *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd* were revised for the online products. Some of these revisions, particularly in *Al-Wafd*, conveyed a tone more critical of the government than was presented in the print versions. While *Al-Ahram* only used photographs that appeared in the newspaper for the online product, 49 (11%) online stories in *Al-Wafd* were accompanied by graphics that did not appear in the print product. In general, the online product of *Al-Wafd* was more visually interesting than that of *Al-Ahram*.

In conclusion, the comparative content analysis of the online and print products of *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd* reveals that the online products replicate about 60% of printed material from the *Al-Ahram* newspaper and 50% from the *Al-Wafd* paper. This ratio of online content to print content, however, is not constant across the online news and editorial sections. While opinion pieces are almost all transported from the print products to the online platforms, the number of news stories selected from the newspapers varies greatly across different online sections. The comparison between the online and print products proves that online content is hard news oriented, with special emphasis on the government and political issues, which represent the greatest percentage of online news topics. Further, the stories selected in this hard news category accentuate the political biases of both organizations. Overall, while online products do contain a mix of national and non-national stories, they do not reflect the full range of news content available in print. The majority of national stories appearing in print are transported into the online

products, while a majority of local, regional and international stories are not. The online content is also predominantly staff-generated. This indicates a common desire of both news organizations to inform the worldwide audience about significant national and international events from their "own" perspectives. In the news selection process, the self-image of the news organization, its status as either the official voice or an opposition voice, and the impression it wishes to project to the outside world determine how the gate-keeping process is handled. The focus on national news and staff-produced stories are two significant characteristics of online news selection. They are also important strategies: by providing what other sources cannot offer, both organizations secure a niche in the global medium of the Internet.

Stylistic Features of Online Content: Al-Ahram and Al-Wafd Compared

The analysis of the stylistic features of *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd* online texts was conducted through the examination of all intertextual links used by both sites. The number and type of hyperlinks (internal or external), as well as the type of additional information provided through these links are all analyzed to determine the intertextuality of the online text. The analysis of different representational formats (words, graphics, audio, video, and animation) determined the use of multimodality in both sites. Reader involvement was measured by examining interactive spaces: online comment spaces, forums, chat-rooms and online polls. The number and type of reader contributions (comments, background information, new facts, and interpretations) were analyzed. Finally, The dynamic status of the site's content was scrutinized by checking both web

sites at the beginning of the day when online news would be posted and at the end of the day in order to note changes, which mainly related to the appearance of a new article.

Intertextuality

The structure of the *Al-Ahram* news site is based on arranging the content in several layers, with navigational hyperlinks that connect these layers at different points. The home page—the first page downloaded onto a reader's browser when the Uniform Resource Locator (URL), the distinctive address for the site, is called up—presents the top layer that guides the reader through different news topics and stories. It resembles the front page of a newspaper insofar as it provides the top news stories of the day. It also offers a hyperlink, menu-based division of news sections. The first layer of a news story comprises enough text to give readers a rough idea about the story and links to offer more details. The subsequent level expands on the story, and also provides "intertextual" hyperlinks that point beyond the immediate and closed structure of the story to produce a range of perspectives and an array of additional information. Thus, while the whole structure involves many hyperlinks to move the reader through the site, what is more important from the standpoint of content development is the intertextual links that appear in the deepest level of a news story.

The *Al-Ahram* online site published a total of 734 articles over a period of seven days, with an average of 92 articles per day. Of the total number of online articles, 38 (6%) used intertextual links (for a total of 88 links), with an average of 2 links per story.

Table 4.8: The Use of Hyperlinks in *Al-Ahram* News Site

News Section*	Hyperlinks		
	Total Stories/ Links	Current Articles	Archived Documents
The Front Page	11/17	15	2
Local News	3/4	3	1
Arab News	9/24	20	4
World News	2/4	4	0
Reportage	4/17	14	3
Economy	2/4	3	1
Sports	3/12	12	0
Woman and Child	1/1	1	0
Al-Ahram Files	3/5	4	1
Total	**38/88**	**76**	**12**

* The table includes only the news sections that used hyperlinks

Table 4.8 shows the distribution of these links in different online news sections in *Al-Ahram*. The hyperlinks offered with news stories in the *Al-Ahram* site expanded on the original content with relevant current articles published in the same news section or in different sections (86.4%) and with pertinent archive documents (13.6%). By grouping related stories from different news sections, the online content better organized information than the print content of the newspaper. The artificial division of news was removed and events were presented as "connected" as they happen in the real world where, for example, politics and the economy are intertwined, and a political event often has economic implications. As well, the background information provided by the

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archived articles placed current events within a historical context that gave more details and allowed for more interpretations.

All the links, however, were internal, presenting other stories published by the *Al-Ahram* newspaper either in different news sections or in previous issues. The use of internal hyperlinks emphasized the site's desire to tell the story from one single point of view. Although the different texts accessed through these links provided related information and contextualized data, they all have the mark of *Al-Ahram* news organization. All, in fact, keep the reader within the boundaries of filtered and controlled information structured by the official, conservative news philosophy of the organization. The reader has no chance to be exposed to external documents or news sources that may offer alternative information, story angles, or perspectives. Indeed, the only external links the site offers are those classified under the index called "Sites for Visit," which is published in the home page. This index represents links to presidential and government sites, community organization and sports club sites, tourism guides, university sites and other official media sites. Yet, these links stand disjointedly from news stories as recommended sites for readers to explore. Furthermore, all hyperlinks took the form of related texts placed at the end of news stories. According to some new media scholars, however, to fully utilize the Internet as a news medium, a wide range of links should be provided *within* the stories themselves, offering explanations and interpretations of story elements and events (Fredin, 1997, p.2).

The preoccupation with hard news in the online products is also manifested in the number of hyperlinks that accompanied this category of news in *Al-Ahram*. Of the 88

linked stories used online, 56 (64%) accompanied hard news stories. These hyperlinks expanded the story content, by presenting reactions, and by offering different interpretations of events. For instance, a story about the Israeli invasion of "Jenin" and the shooting of a number of Palestinians had six hyperlinked stories about: 1) the Palestinian Authority's reaction and denunciation of Israeli military operations; 2) a United Nation's expert analysis of the Israeli army's destruction of Palestinian infrastructure and the inhuman conditions in which the Palestinian people live; 3) the Egyptian government response to the Israeli military practices and its call to stop Israeli attacks; 4) a comment on CNN and American media coverage of the Israeli invasion; 5) a record of Israeli military operations in the previous two months in the West Bank and Gaza Strips; and, 6) the impact of the war on the Israeli and Palestinian economies. This collection of stories provided a broad range of related information as well as archived data, comments, and interpretations. All enriched the primary story, providing several lenses through which the original event could be interpreted. Although five stories were already published in the newspaper, they were scattered across the front page and the Arab news section, and the sixth story was recalled from the archive of the paper. Using a high percentage of hyperlinks for hard news stories indicates the importance online editors assigned to these issues.

The *Al-Wafd* news site, in contrast, offered no intertextual links at all. Although the site deployed a hyperlink structure that organized information on different levels and with multiple pathways to allow passage from one subject to another, these links had only navigational functions. There were, however, some external links provided by readers

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who participated in the interactive spaces offered beneath the news stories for readers to comment and express their ideas and opinions. A total of 17 links with 14 news stories were provided, including links to the *Al-Jazeera* News Network, *Washington Post*, *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* and *Al-Shaab* sites. These sites published more information or offered alternative views that provided a foundation for the participants' arguments or supported and elevated their own opinions. I will deal with reader participation in *Al-Wafd* in a later section.

Multimodality

With regard to the use of multimedia, the *Al-Ahram* site used more than one modality to present news. In addition to text and graphics, it used audio and video clips that covered some sport events, including highlights from Egyptian soccer games. The audio-visual content was presented in the home page in a separate space and updated daily. *Al-Ahram* also provided an audio-video database that contained a large number of Egyptian soccer goals, which can be retrieved in various ways. Although the audiovisual content represented a very small portion compared to the text and graphics, it enriched the sport coverage with information not easily captured by words or still images. Technical problems were a drawback; limited network bandwidth meant that it took a long time for accessing/downloading the audiovisual content and affected its quality. The use of multimedia in the *Al-Wafd* news site was very limited. Besides the text and graphics, the site only used animation to present the headlines of breaking news. This mode of representation added a sense of immediacy to the textual content.

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Reader Involvement

Another characteristic of the online news content is reader involvement. Except for a generic E-mail facility, the *Al-Ahram* site did not provide a space for reader participation, let alone the opportunity to make their views public. The site, in fact, was self-enclosed, acting according to the traditional news model as a one-way source of information, negating the broad scope of possibilities offered by the Internet for interaction with and between users. On the contrary, the *Al-Wafd* site involved the reader in the creation of content in two significant ways. First, it presented an option at the end of each news story for readers to interact with the story content by posting ideas, comments, and relevant information, without any form of mediation. It also made reading the postings of contributors straightforward, like accessing another page of the news story. Second, the site hosted a discussion forum whose communicative structure fostered a two-way public exchange of ideas between news producers and the readers, and amongst the readers themselves. This forum adopted the ethos of newsgroups, providing a space for participants to post messages and respond to other postings.

In total, the *Al-Wafd* site published 457 articles over a period of seven days with an average of 65 articles per day. The readers of the site contributed a total of 251 items in response to the online news content, with an average of 36 items per day. While some of these contributions were composed of only a few words, others exceeded 1,000 words.

Table 4.9: Reader Contributions in *Al-Wafd* News Site

News Sections	Reader Contributions					
	Comments	Background Information	New Facts	Interpr-etations	Multiple Forms	Total
The Front Page	76	9	5	13	14	117
Local News	11	2	0	3	3	19
Reportage	3	0	0	0	0	3
Arab & International News	5	2	1	1	2	11
Economy	1	0	1	0	0	2
Crime	30	0	0	1	3	34
Sports	26	1	0	1	2	30
Opinion	7	2	2	2	3	16
Columns	3	1	0	2	3	9
The Last Page	5	1	0	0	1	7
The Sparrow	3	0	0	0	0	3
Totals	170 68%	18 7%	9 4%	23 9%	31 12%	251 100%

Table 4.9 shows that reader contributions varied greatly across different news sections. The majority of readers' contributions (68%) were general comments on the news stories. 7% of these contributions added background information to the news, and 4% offered new facts and information that the stories did not mention. Nine percent of the contributions presented interpretations of the stories as readers drew attention to what they considered to be the truth behind news events. As these contributions revealed, some readers seemed to have first hand experience with some of the news issues and events, which allowed

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them to analyze the stories and present new information. Others, however, cross-checked the news stories with several sources, and tried to provide what they thought was missing from *Al-Wafd* coverage. Twelve percent of the contributions provided a mixture of comment, background information, new facts and interpretation.

In many ways, readers' contributions offered a critical reading of news events. They brought different perspectives to news issues and analyzed several topics and stories in greater detail. For instance, a story about Washington's announcement that it would block extra financial aid to Egypt because of the imprisonment of the human rights activist Saad Eldin Ibrahim raised heated debate on the charges against Ibrahim and the repressive practices of the government. As well, the story opened a fiery discussion about U.S. aid to Egypt; many readers condemned this aid and called for immediate measures to achieve independent development, freeing Egypt from foreign pressure, and others praised the partnership between Egypt and the United States, considering the financial aid part of the U.S. commitment toward development and peace in the Middle East. Some contributions provided background information about Saad Ibrahim's cause, human rights and civil society in Egypt, the history of U.S. financial aid (which started after the Camp David Peace Treaty between Egypt and Israel in 1979), the projects in which this aid was invested, and the impact of these projects on development. Others offered new facts related to U.S. aid and Ibrahim's cause, and presented links to lead readers to other online news sources with different angles and alternative views. While the original story was composed of only 216 words, readers' responses to this story amounted to 1,614 words (a total of 18 postings). Another news story on the Sudanese regime's complaint about

Egypt in the Security Council initiated a wide debate on the political relations between

Egypt and Sudan, a debate in which Sudanese readers participated along with Egyptians.

This online debate thus introduced some Sudanese insights, which had not appeared in the

original coverage. Contributors critically debated the history of relationships between

Egypt and Sudan, the strategic importance of Sudan (which is the southern gate to Egypt)

and the various integration and unity projects between the two countries. While the news

story was only 188 words, readers' contributions to this story were 3,993 words (a total of

20 contributions).

In general, reader involvement in *Al-Wafd* showed that contributors came from

across the political spectrum, expressing different, often conflicting, views. In responding

to opinion pieces published in the editorial sections, some of the contributors presented

views that contradicted those of the organization and its journalists. Others were even

critical about the partisan nature of the *Al-Wafd* news organization. Readers' contributions

thus broadened the content of the news stories and presented a cultural struggle over

meaning. They clearly manifested the Stuart Hall theory of reading. Hall (1980) proposes

that the process of constructing meaning from media text is implicated by the position a

reader takes with respect to the dominant ideology. According to Hall's hypothesis, the

reader can take three positions in media text interpretations—adopting the preferred

meaning coded in the text, negotiating that meaning, or rejecting the encoded meaning

altogether and creating an oppositional reading. Although Hall's hypothesis has been

found to be rather problematic in some audience studies (e.g. Morley, 1980; 1989), these

positions were evident in *Al-Wafd* readers' interpretive practices. As the readers publicly

contributed their views and arguments and provided links to other news sources that supported their own opinions and legitimized their own readings, they, in fact, exercised a form of cultural power that generated a wider meaning potential. As a result, the online news text acquired many levels of cultural intertextuality, challenging the limitations and controls structured into the text that had been intended to act as agents of closure and forced interpretation.

Table 4.10: Topics of the Online Forum of *Al-Wafd*

Forum	Topics	Posts	% of total Topics
National Politics	532	8149	22
Economic Issues	102	1352	4
Anti-Corruption	186	2138	8
July Revolution, Nasser & Sadat	28	1198	1
International Politics & September 11 Events	139	1764	6
Palestinian Cause	173	1060	7
Political and Economic Issues (Sub-Totals)	**1160**	**15661**	**48**
Egyptian Communications Policies	84	1210	3
Newspapers and Magazines	135	876	6
Islam	269	3074	11
Family and Children	77	912	3
Egyptian Immigrants	98	1938	4
Sports	23	186	1
Entertainment	58	1022	2
General Topics (Sub-Totals)	**744**	**9218**	**30**

Cultural & Scientific Issues	38	468	1
Education	68	562	3
Medical Consultations	51	362	2
Poetry & Arts	289	1709	12
Computer & Internet	89	544	4
Science, Literature & Technology (Sub-Totals)	**535**	**3645**	**22**
Totals	**2439**	**28524**	**100**

The second form of reader involvement, the forum, allowed an even greater opportunity for content-related discussion among readers. Unlike chat rooms that lack defined topics, the forum was categorized into sets of topics. Table 4.10 shows the total number of topics and posts, which were all accessible to visitors to and participants in the online forum on the last day of the study. These topics, according to the forum's organization, are classified under three categories: 1) political and economic issues, which contain government policies; economic issues; anti-corruption issues; the July Revolution, President Nasser, and President Sadat, international policies and the events of September 11; the Palestinian cause and the Arab-Israeli conflict; 2) general topics about Islam; the Egyptian communications system and policies; Egyptian newspapers and magazines; family and children; Egyptian immigrants; and entertainment; and 3) scientific, literary, and technology-related topics, including cultural and scientific issues; medical consultations; education and labor issues; poetry and arts; and the computer and Internet world. The figures indicate that political and economic issues occupy a prominent place in the forum with 48% of all topics and 55% of all posts related to these

issues. Governmental/national policies (22%) and anti-corruption issues (8%) represented the major focus of this category. General topics covered 30% of all forum postings, with Islamic issues (11%) and Egyptian communications policies, newspapers and magazines (6%) at the top of this category. Scientific, literary, and technology-based topics were only 22%; of these, poetry and arts topics were the most popular.

Readers' contributions, which obviously presented a type of content that did not exist in traditional media, offered diversified views and elaborated readings of news stories and events. Unlike other online settings that are purely used for discussions, the forum of *Al-Wafd*, which is surrounded by the news environment of the online site, ensured that readers share some basic knowledge about news events and their discussions were largely focused on pushing the analysis of news events forward, rather than merely providing information. Looking at the discussions in more detail revealed that the online forum was an important site for debating issues of identity, freedom and democracy. A great number of what are normally considered taboo topics for traditional Egyptian media were openly debated. The forum also was a space for oppositional discourse, providing critical perspectives on and diversified readings of current Egyptian political and economic issues. The fact that the political forum was not moderated seemed to encourage participants to engage in lively and unfiltered discussions, which were often more critical than the online news coverage itself. In fact, the different forms of reader involvements in *Al-Wafd* actually transformed the site into more of a political forum than a news service. To a great extent, the forum of *Al-Wafd* was, and still is, a great success: it fosters an open discourse in which individuals outside the traditional power structure have

have a voice—they can express ideas, values and belief that differ from the ones espoused by *Al-Wafd* journalists.

Another important form of reader involvement, albeit less significant in terms of content creation, was online polling. During the study period, *Al-Wafd* published two polls that focused on political topics. The first one questioned "the future of Iraq" and the other asked about "the need for a cabinet shuffle in Egypt." Readers had several responses to choose from. Both polls allowed the reader to register their opinions and then instantly see how other readers have responded to the same questions. The results of these polls (which ran before, during, and after the seven days of the study) gave a general indication of readers' attitudes and opinions. Although the credibility and validity of the results of online polls are highly questionable since respondents are self-selected and demographically non-representative of the general public (Kim et al., 2000, p. 847), the very use of these online polls marks a new development. Unlike the North American and European news media that consistently conduct and report poll results, opinion polls are not a common practice in Egyptian society, and if they are conducted, the results are rarely reported. Although most politicians often claim that they are speaking in the name of people and that the majority is on their side, the opinions of the populace are rarely probed by opinion surveys. The use of the online polls is thus a beginning of the actual interest in exploring the opinions of people, or some segments of them. Furthermore, the online forum of *Al-Wafd* allowed the participants to post opinion polls related to topics discussed in the forum. Several polls were posted, particularly with political topics.

However, the participation in these polls was restricted to registered participants of the forum, not all readers of the site.

With regard to news archives, both *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd* stored all news published online and made these materials accessible. These archives allowed the reader to supplement current stories with background information or trace the development of news events over time. *Al-Ahram* also offered an internal search engine that allowed readers to search for keywords, thus giving them an opportunity to obtain more contextualized information about the topics of interest to them, regardless of whether the information originates from politics, economics, or opinion sections. Readers, therefore, were able to view stories outside the restraints of sections and recognize the linkage of issues. Neither sites, however, offered a customization option; readers could not personalize their news package, and so were presented with the same generic news service.

Dynamism

Finally, *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd* had largely static content. For a period of seven days, a total of 19 new articles appeared on the web site of *Al-Ahram* at the end of the day that were not online at the beginning of the day. All these news stories were published in the third edition of the newspaper. Similarly, *Al-Wafd* published 41 new stories in the section "Breaking News," with an average of 6 articles per day. These items, which did not appear in *Al-Wafd* newspaper, were very short (one paragraph in length), and mainly came from news agencies, presenting only Arab and International news. Except for these minor changes, the online content of both sites remained the same throughout the day.

The data analysis thus revealed that each site utilized the structural features of the medium in distinctive ways and to different extents. *Al-Ahram*, while exploiting some of the intertextual, multimedia and archiving capabilities of the Internet, ignored one of the most significant characteristics of the Internet—its capacity to engage readers in the creation of news content and to facilitate a genuine two-way dialogue between journalists and users. While the vast resources of *Al-Ahram* could theoretically enable 24-hour, minute-by-minute updating, the site mostly limited its services to the printed material already in the newspaper. In contrast, *Al-Wafd* sought to encourage audience involvement in various ways, but did not take advantage of the intertextuality and multimedia capabilities of the Internet. While a lack of resources could justify the limited, almost nonexistent, presence of multimedia, the use of intertextual hyperlinks could be improved. In general, the digital news content of both organizations cannot simply be equated with the traditional content of their newspapers. The digital text is positioned within a larger context that instantly links current news coverage with archived information; and in case of *Al-Wafd*, the text is derived not only from the writing of journalists and the viewpoint of the organization, but also from reader opinions and contributions, which counterbalance the dependence on official and partisan sources to interpret news events.

Conclusion

The online gate-keeping process in *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd* is clearly structured to emphasize certain types of priorities. The online products tend to include more hard news topics, particularly political issues. While soft news stories might be more likely to entice

the audience in the new and uncertain environment of the Internet, both organizations

dealt with the online medium primarily as a form of political platform, albeit with

different objectives. The political biases of *Al-Ahram*, the government newspaper, and *Al-Wafd*, the opposition newspaper, are better reflected in the online products than in their

print counterparts. As well, the online content tends to focus more on national stories. The

online products of the two organizations attempt to communicate national events to their

immediate communities and to the world audience at large. Readers were left to seek out

the regional and international news of interest to them from other news and information

sources on the Internet. Online content is predominantly staff-generated, presenting

respective news stories from the perspectives of the two organizations and their editors.

While changes to the content of the online products were generally minor, some of the

modifications conveyed a tone more critical of the government than the original print

stories.

The structural features of the Internet reshape the content in a substantially

different way. While the online medium delivers primarily the same information as its

print counterpart, the capabilities of the online medium permit interpretive transformation

not available in the newspaper. Traditional media are self-enclosed entities that categorize

information within spatial and temporal contexts. In contrast, the online medium, with its

open character, presents an opportunity to expand the interpretive boundaries, allowing

readers to produce and evaluate information in new contexts. Internet textuality produces

new modes of social communication, based on altered text organization, and a greater

breadth of contextualized information (Yau & Hawamdeh, 2001). Furthermore, readers'

contributions to the online content provide different viewpoints and thus situate news stories in alternative contexts. Web-based discussions of news issues often redirect the meaning of certain news stories and negate the opportunity to provide definitive closure, as is attempted in print editorials. Interactivity, in effect, shifts the interpretation of news into the social sphere and distances the online medium from its traditional predecessors, where opinions and comments remain almost exclusively within the purview of the editors.

The unique characteristics of the Internet not only restructure the content but also have a democratizing potential, capable of altering the relationships of readers to the media producers. This is, Hall (2001) argues, "the reason why many branded online providers offer news in multimedia formats, which are as far from being interactive as their newspaper precursors. They neither provide links to their own sources and to other views of the story nor do they offer their readers effective ways of responding or intervening" (2001, p. 38). This also, in part, explains why the *Al-Wafd* site, as the platform of a liberal opposition party, encourages reader involvement in content creation, while *Al-Ahram*, the government news organization, is not willing to relinquish authorial control over content. The new features of the online medium also move content production a step further away from a hierarchical to more egalitarian level by enabling communities of users to exchange their ideas, opinions, and beliefs in various interactive spaces and to mobilize around specific issues or stories. Stories about corruption in some official circles, for instance, led to the creation of a specific section in the *Al-Wafd* news forum for people interested in mobilizing against corrupt practices. In short, the specific

nature of the medium transforms the content from static representations of the world, created by specific authors, into a site of struggle over the meaning of these representations. Online representations become increasingly fluid, dynamic and open-ended. In general, I concur with Feldman (1997) that the term "content" in the online medium does not have the same meaning as it does in the traditional media (1997, p. 154).

Chapter 5

The Impact of the Online News Medium:
Prospects for Liberalization

Unlike traditional news media, the Internet permits an interactive communication model. This interactive model features new patterns for the production and consumption of content, leading to new forms of representation and new ways of negotiating meaning. The networked nature of the Internet news medium, its communicative capabilities, and the multiple ways in which the user actively appropriates the technology for participatory engagement and self-articulation—all these factors establish the online medium as unique, with the potential for refashioning the communications culture and the long-standing structure of the Egyptian mass media. This chapter examines the impact of the online news medium. It addresses two major questions. How does the online medium influence the existing communication systems? And, how are changes in the media landscape being used to extend the emerging public sphere in Egypt?

The assessment of the impact of the Internet on social communications is based on the views of a group of media experts from the three most distinctive constituencies making use of this new technology in Egypt: they are the government, the party and independent newspapers (Appendix D). The conception of the Internet as a new public space will be examined against the actual practices of individuals, diverse social and

political groups and civil society organizations that use the online medium for exposing and debating public affairs. It is important to stress, however, that the Internet in Egypt is in an embryonic stage. It is therefore unlikely that more than a first tentative overview of its impact can be offered. Yet, in spite of this, the thesis has shown that the Egyptian media system has begun to change, indicating that a long-term process has begun, which will ultimately involve other kinds of social and political influences.

The Internet and the Restructuring of the Media Landscape

In his assessment of mass media in the Middle East, Jon Anderson (1999) notes that, the communication structure of the Middle East for the past 40 years has been shaped by the one-to-many model of mass media. This model, which is well suited to authoritarian, centralized regimes, emphasizes the dissemination of government-endorsed authoritative messages and favors "ritual communication of the theater state and protocol news: public life [is] dominated by representations of state power, authority, and symbolic legitimacy, which register the solemnities of exchanges between authorities, from which not only the masses but also whole classes... are excluded or relegated to spectator roles" (1999). The typical response of citizens to this model, Anderson argues, is one of cynicism and disenfranchisement:

> Far from being molded in its images, they [citizens] experience social distance from them [mass media], a disconnect between the rituals of state and everyday life. The typical response is to develop practical senses of distance, irony, deconstructionist skills, cynicism, and conspiracy theories of politics as 'hidden.' Citizens do not see themselves in media, or they see flattened, partial versions of more complex realities distorted by focusing on too few variables. They develop habits of media consumption that reintroduce interaction into one-way reception by drawing on

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understandings and practices of everyday life.... More structural responses include the widespread habit throughout the region of group listening or watching broadcasts. Coffee-houses, diwaniyya, and salons in private homes are social settings in which intimates consume, and domesticate, messages from authorities and 'complete' them through interpretive practices that betoken trust not in the messages, and certainly not in distant senders, but in circles of intimates to decode messages socially. A linked practice is listening to and comparing news from several sources, deconstructing them against templates of interests the sources are supposed to represent. A typical evening's activities in guest houses across the region includes discussing and comparing the 'news' from various sources, creating a local composite out of what was said and what the listeners could bring to interpreting it (1999).

Important as this assessment may be, however, it tends to regard the Middle East as a monolithic bloc of states, which share identical social, political and economic environments. It reinforces a sense of a universal media regime and fails to acknowledge the diversity of media environments in different Middle Eastern countries. Although the Arab media systems have developed in a similar historical and cultural environment, they seem to exhibit substantial variations. It is true that in the post-independence era different political elites in the Arab countries used the mass media as a tool for building politically unified states and therefore exaggerated the uniformity and homogeneity of the citizenry. However, this process was not identical from country to country. Moreover, some countries, including Egypt, have recently begun to diversify their media regimes, permitting oppositional voices and outlets, particularly in the newspaper medium. Consequently, the media regimes and policies in Egypt are far more complex than Anderson's model suggests. In spite of the government's direct control over the broadcast media, there exists a degree of pluralism and openness in the press. In addition, party and independent newspapers present politically diverse points of view and critically examine

government policies. In the process, they constitute a form of public space in which the dominance of the official media is challenged. The discrepancies between these more interactive and one-way media structures make the Egyptian experience both complex and interesting.

There are still many problems in the Egyptian media. According to the experts interviewed for this study, official media generally narrow rather than widen the possibilities for communication inputs. As state monopolies, the broadcast media primarily focus on "marketing the government's policies. Audiences' needs and interests are not a priority for these media" (Fahmy Hwadi, personal communication, 2002). As such, they provide a controlled space for "managing and influencing public opinion to serve the purposes of the state" (Emad Adib, personal communication, 2002). Moreover, the dominance of entertainment programs in the broadcast media in comparison to information programming is considered to be "a clear indication that distraction rather than active participation in the local affairs is on the minds of the television producers.... News and current affairs are characterized by an absence of controversial debates" (Ibrahim Essa personal communication, 2002). Salama A. Salama, managing editor of *Al-Ahram*, considers news services in the official broadcast outlets and the government press to be "superficial, providing a one-sided portrayal of local and international affairs, and lacking accuracy and transparency. The media deliberately manipulate language, using ambiguous terms to misguide readers" (Salama, personal communication, 2002). Legal restrictions and the limited margin for interpretive independence force most journalists to exercise a high degree of self-censorship. "True investigative reporting that could

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influence readers in an active manner seems to be in retreat" (Ehab El-Zalaky, personal communication, 2002).

According to Talat Romaih, editor-in- chief of the *Al-Shaab* party newspaper (which now publishes only an online edition after the Political Party Commission, a government body in charge of licensing parties and overseeing their activities, suspended the newspaper), news coverage in government media is "official, traditional, delayed…. Although they [broadcast media] have recently made some improvements to reduce audiences' reliance on foreign and Arab satellite channels, they are still far from being competitive." He notes that the government applies enormous pressures on party newspapers, and "opposition journalists are still treated as spies, and therefore they can not gather a sufficient amount of news and information… Yet these newspapers occasionally make journalistic scoops on issues about which the official press remains silent" (Romaih, personal communication, 2002). Gamal Fahmey, managing editor of the party newspaper, *Al-Arabi*, states that, while the party press attempts to provide different descriptions of local realities, it too suffers from partisan loyalties that color news coverage and ultimately decrease its credibility to the public (Fahmy, personal communication, 2002). Gihan Shaban, assistant editor of the independent newspaper *Saut Al-Omma,* argues that the independent press, which presents itself as an alternative, free from political influences, experiences economic problems. The pressure of the bottom line makes the independent press "more obsessed with generating revenues through increasing circulation figures and therefore providing more populist, light and uncontroversial subjects and issues. While occasionally criticizing the government [and]

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uncovering corrupt practices, market pressures [and] the need to attract government advertisers are often too strong to overcome" (Shaban, personal communication, 2002).

In this communicative environment, the relationship of the readers to the media is characterized by a general lack of trust. The phrase used by many readers to describe the media's coverage, *kalam garaied* (newspaper talk) does not mean news; it means empty talk. In 1992, Abd El-Rahmen, Abd El-Magid, and Kamel's *The Communicator in the Egyptian Press* surveyed 426 journalists. According to the responses they obtained a majority of journalists believe that the Egyptian press generally enjoys a low level of credibility. The official dominance of major newspapers, the legacy of a government-mouthpiece press, and exaggerations and contradictions in the press coverage are the major factors that undermine the credibility of the Egyptian press (1992, pp. 102-103). This seems to remain the case more than a decade after their study. While traditional media exhibit some diversity in points of views and recently have witnessed some improvements in reporting, the existing media regime still leaves much to be desired.

New communication technologies have, however, introduced some changes in the media environment. Among these are the availability of transnational media, particularly via satellite networks, and the Internet. Both of these offer an alternative news and information regime and interpretations that challenge what had previously been a controlled information space, with few and arm's length oppositional voices, not only in Egypt, but in almost all Arab countries. Satellites began to have an impact for the first time in the Arab media world when they were used to transmit copies of the pan-Arab daily newspapers such as *Al-Hayat*, *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, and *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, which

were originally published in London and Paris, to be printed in such cities as Casablanca, Morocco, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and Cairo. While not fully independent, these newspapers, which are based outside of the Arab world, enjoy a relatively high degree of autonomy from the Arab governments. This freedom permits them to treat Arab and world issues with greater objectivity and comprehensiveness, opening a space to different voices along the political spectrums such as Islamists, pan-Arabists, and Marxists. Their critical approach has been met with distribution bans in many Arab countries (Gareeb, 2000, p. 413). Similarly, a number of new pan-Arab satellite television networks emerged in the 1990s, including the London-based Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC) and the Rome-based Orbit Network (both owned by Saudis), the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC), and the most important and controversial outlet, the Qatari-owned and -based Al-Jazeera. As El-Nawawy and Iskandar (2002) comment,

> Al-Jazeera has, indeed, revolutionized the media environment in the Arab world by broadcasting what no other Arab news organizations dared to: the hard, often harsh truth of Arab life, culture, and politics. Before Al-Jazeera, most Arab regimes' broadcasting dictated a steady diet of mind-numbing entertainment and bland, often harmless news and talk shows (2002, p. 29).

Launched November 1, 1996, Al-Jazeera has rapidly increased its scope of coverage, becoming the first Arab network to broadcast news and discussions 24 hours a day, stunning its viewers with wide-ranging political debates unprecedented in their frankness. It offers news programming, call-in shows and political discussions and debates between guests with widely divergent views, disturbing the one-dimensional depiction of "truth" that has long prevailed in the region (Gareeb, 2000, p. 405). By providing professional and credible news coverage, openly questioning Western policies toward the Arab world,

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occasionally criticizing Arab governments, and offering heated and sometimes sensational debates about previously taboo issues, Al-Jazeera has developed a reputation as "the most credible and respected news source for the Arab public" (Ghadbian, 2001). Citizens vote for Al-Jazeera with their remote controls.

Although satellite networks, particularly Al-Jazeera, have enormous influence on the media scene in Egypt, and though the Internet is still in its infancy because of access costs in Egypt, it will ultimately be the most important new medium in the Egyptian media landscape. Its expanding universe of information and news includes online sites of Western media outlets, major transnational and local Arab newspapers, satellite television stations, and news agencies, such as Reuters, Agence France Press and The Associated Press, not to mention many purely online news sites. All of these Internet sources undermine the privileged status of the official media, and diminish the centralized control over information provided to the public. In such an environment, where information, knowledge and opinions can escape official control mechanisms, the communication hierarchies of the traditional media are flattened. Individuals have more opportunities than ever before to consume a vast array of alternative news sources and to engage in new patterns of multidirectional, interactive communication, which are very dissimilar to their usual experiences with the conventional news media.

Anderson (1999) calls these new changes in the communication environment a "post-mass media model":

> If the signature communicative relationship of the mass media in the Middle East was reception, under a regime of one-to-many senders to receivers or mass audiences for state monopoly broadcasters, the counterpart of post-mass media is more interactive communication in

which the senders multiply and social distance between senders and receivers diminishes.... New media level the communication playing field between sender/producer and recipient/consumer of messages. Moreover, messages cross boundaries between media and thereby find new audiences, new circulation to additional social networks.... Technology for producing and sending messages becomes as available to consumers as technology for receiving at the same time.... [Post-mass media] increase the number of senders, producers, selectors, and brokers of cultural 'content'.... The participation in interpretation that previously occurred in coffee houses and reception rooms, now extends to what is broadcast... (1999).

This new communication model, Anderson and Eickelman (1999) argue, collapses the "media duality" that kept alternative views submerged from the public eye:

Many Middle Eastern governments tolerate a degree of experimentation abroad that is anathema at home and in Arabic. Free expression at the margins provides a safety valve and a way of keeping tabs on opponents and alternatives at a safe distance from local arenas. This 'distancing' is breaking down, not just as those arenas are penetrated, but more importantly as the number of conversations multiply and find their way into public media and wider circulation (1999).

In Egypt, the Internet medium, which features seeking over reception and increases the interactivity of the news consumption process, beginning with a growing number of choices of alternative sources and extending to active participation in reader forums, has already started to change the Egyptian media landscape. Commenting on the Internet's capacity as a communication medium, Michael Dahan (1999) argues that "from 1870 to the early 1970s, technology has tended to facilitate centralization.... Today, [the Internet] is having the opposite effect, facilitating the decentralization of power... [and] strengthening the periphery at the expense of the center" (1999). Thus, the Internet puts an unprecedented amount of control in the hands of the users, allowing them to operate in a public communication space, which exists outside the institutionalized information-

providing outlets. The traditional mass media facilitated a journalism that is part of the same political culture on which it reports. The new media, in contrast, bring new and different social interest groups into the public discourse, and thus facilitate a broader-based journalism. According to the media experts interviewed for this study, the major change producing characteristics of the Internet are related to access and participation, censorship and freedom of expression.

Access and Participation

At the most general level, the mushrooming number of news sources on the Internet expand the choices for Egyptian users exponentially, and circumvent restrictions on information flow. More important, the increasing access to relevant and credible information sources "allows readers to analyze, compare and evaluate political data and reports with a more critical eye than they have done before" (Ibrahim Essa, personal communication, 2002). By introducing views of political figures traditionally at the margins of the Egyptian media landscape, Internet sources pluralize the Egyptian audience's understanding of their realities (Fahmy, personal communication, 2002). The Internet further decentralizes and chips away at the traditional news media monopoly over the dissemination and interpretation of information. Ehab El-Zelaky, editor-in- chief of *Online* magazine, comments:

> The Internet has created an open structure of information.... Now readers are not under the authority of the writer; they are empowered to get information other than what the writer provides. In the past, the reader had to be knowledgeable about the topic presented by the writer to evaluate it or to accept or reject it. But now, with the presence of the Internet and the

decrease of writer authority, it is quite easy for the reader to get other information that helps evaluate whatever is presented....

In addition, the abundant news resources of the Internet means that withholding information or news or controlling people's choices of information sources becomes impossible... (El-Zelaky, personal communication, 2002).

The Internet also gives ordinary readers easier access to media professionals and publishers. As Salama A. Salama states:

The Internet permits a strong relationship between the writer and the reader. It is interesting to see the impact of each individual article..., how readers evaluate information, hold opinions on the content, dispute any of the facts presented, have a different point of view to put forward or have information to contribute.... Journalists are beginning to be more responsive to their readers, some receiving tens of emails daily. This means they are forced to be more in touch with their [readers'] needs and requirements (Salama, personal communication, 2002).

In a similar vein, Ibrahim Essa, editor-in-chief of the independent *Al-Dostour* newspaper, notes:

Lively discussions and reader forums are excellent means not only to contribute to the argument on issues and topics published, but more importantly to approach, understand and capture public opinion, or at least the opinions of those who use the Internet. This was not possible before the Internet.... In the Arab world, methods of measuring public opinion are all governmental, official, and filled with restrictions and gatekeepers. Now, through the Internet, eliciting opinions of some segments of the population has become so easy. These features are a positive force for the formation of more responsive media. And, as readers' discussions illustrate, the public is becoming increasingly critical of media content and more vocal about their desire for the media to respond effectively to the need for reliable information.... Readers' access to numerous, alternative sources impacts their perception of the role mass media have to play in society (Essa, personal communication, 2002).

The Internet, in sum, serves as an outlet for users to register their opinions, to make their needs and desires known to media professionals, to criticize media performance and therefore to exert pressure on the media hierarchy, making it more responsive.

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Another aspect of Internet accessibility results from the ease with which

individuals and groups can publish news websites. As Thornton (2002) argues,

> The structural features of the traditional mass media that allowed media
> concentration to occur, are not present on the Internet. For example, to be a
> television broadcaster one requires a television station and transmitter.
> There are a finite number of these, and as starting one is extremely
> expensive it is difficult for an individual or small group to own the means
> of production. To be a newspaper publisher one must have, or be able to
> pay for, the means of printing, bulk quantities of paper, and distribution
> mechanisms. The Internet, on the other hand, is not a physical structure. It
> is spread across an enormous number of computers across the world. It
> would be theoretically possible for a conglomerate to take control of these.
> However, the deliberately anarchic, decentralised physical structure of the
> Internet mitigates against this. It would be very difficult to identify every
> participating computer and to take control of it (2002, p.36).

Ossama El-Dalil, editor-in-chief of the online magazine *Al-Morasel*, argues that the

Internet requires no major capital investments to set up a news site that can be reached by

anyone with Internet access. This capability has encouraged a new generation of media

producers to step into the online publishing field. The Internet transfers the cost of

distribution to the reader who has to pay for the computer and the Internet connection,

and therefore "permits a vast array of content innovators to spread ideas, information and

news about politics, economics, religion, social relations, sports, or a combination of all

of them, to anyone who cares to pay attention" (El-Dalil, personal communication, 2002).

El-Zelaky contends that "Internet accessibility lays the foundation for a new breed of

media professionals in the Arab world.... Most of them are enthusiastic youth who

publish alternative news sites that challenge the hierarchical presentation of protocol

news in broadcast and press outlets, speak to their readers in vernacular language, and

present content that corresponds to younger people's needs, desires and outlooks" (El-

Zelaky, personal communication, 2002). Al-Sayed El-Nagar, assistant editor of the

government *Al-Akhbar* newspaper and the supervisor of its online news site, notes that "a

wide segment of the younger population became attracted to these online news sites,

particularly those with specialized content—from politics to religion to music—more than

newspapers.... To some degree the decline in newspaper readership can be attributed to

the Internet" (El-Nagar, personal communication, 2002).

The Internet's capacity to provide space for readers to comment and discuss news

events creates new forms of and possibilities for communication. The crucial advantage

of the Internet, argues Ossama El-Dalil, is its democratic structure, which accommodates

different reader opinions and perspectives. "The Internet cuts through all the barriers that

kept reader contributions away from the mainstream media... [It] involves them in the

news and stimulates public debate in a way that is much more sophisticated than call-in

live programs on some satellite television channels" (El-Dalil, personal communication,

2002). In contrast to the "informing" orientation of traditional mass media, the Internet is

more "involving," allowing for interaction and the expression of multiple perspectives

and views. Ibrahim Essa argues that:

> The Internet facilitates the emergence of a new type of reader: an active
> participating reader. It is not sufficient for him [sic] to know for himself,
> but he wants to share this knowledge with others. This explains why most
> online news sites now offers the option *'send it to a friend.'* At the
> beginning, this option was nonexistent, yet with the realization that it is
> important for readers to share news, it became commonplace in news
> sites.... A new pattern of information dissemination is thus evolving.

> In addition to this form of news exchange, reader interventions and
> comments provide new information, facts, [and] thoughts... but more
> importantly create a public dialogue over public issues—a new level of
> making meaning" (Essa, personal communication, 2002).

The advent of online journalistic forms that give a voice to the public seems to offer some

hope for a new kind of journalism. According to Ehab El-Zelaky, reader participation in

online news has the capacity to reinvent journalism itself, at least in the Arab world. He

argues that:

> The emphasis of online journalism is on the two-way flow of information.
> It allows people to speak who generally do not feel that their voices are
> heard in society. We now see some participations of the readers that are
> more vocal, more daring than the newspaper coverage itself.... In some
> party newspapers, the online forums present analysis and comment on
> news the journalists dare not offer.... We see how online voting in some
> news sites like Al-Jazeera gets one hundred thousand votes in two or three
> days, expressing readers' opinions and thoughts. These new elements are
> capable of redefining the role of journalism in our [Arab] societies (El-
> Zelaky, personal communication, 2002).

Internet accessibility and reader engagement in the online news environment thus

seems to provide a qualitative change in the Egyptian media culture. Several alternative

news sites that bypass traditional gatekeepers offer new forms of information and a

widening opportunity for citizens to acquire a different, more detailed picture of political,

cultural and social events. As the Internet gives rise to new methods for the inclusion of

individual voices, it creates a realm of mixed discourses, something that has been

traditionally absent from the conventional mass media. This mix is fostered by

publishing, posting and reposting different news items, incorporating the views, thoughts

and comments of the readers. The intense engagement of Egyptian Internet users in

news forums underscores their new privileged position as interpreters, people who

openly share their own reading of public affairs. In so doing, the Internet challenges the

influence and control of government media, which now face competition from both the

satellite television channels and the online news sites. This competition has led, as

Gareeb (2000) documents, to a reduction in the audience for the official media in most Arab countries, which has, in turn, brought pressures to bear on these media to bring their news coverage more in line with what their audiences are interested in (2000, pp. 416-417).

Censorship and Freedom of Expression

Media freedom in Arab countries, argues Hussein Amin (2002), is deeply affected by the "censorial political culture" that prevails in the region. Developed in an environment usually dominated by a single political party, the censorial culture requires strict control over the media, particularly broadcasting, to utilize them as "a means to promote [government] political, cultural, and economic programs and to filter what... [viewers/listeners] hear and see" (2002, p. 126). Arguments for the limitation of freedom of expression in the region usually cluster around the preservation of state and national security concerns, which "encompass far more than military threats from foreign countries. They involve anything that can be considered a threat to the ruling institutions and their interests, including negative statements about religions or beliefs, Arab nationalism and its struggle, values, and national traditions" (Amin, 2002, p. 128).

Direct censorship by the state and censorship by journalists themselves (self-censorship or the censorship of editors and publishers) are commonplace in Arab news media. Broadcast media, which can bypass illiteracy and appeal to a mass audience, are controlled more closely than the print media, although the latter also experience censorship:

through offices of censors within the newspaper itself, through government-appointed editors in chief, or by controlling news sources. In many Arab countries, the government from time to time gives guidelines on content to the print media, directly or indirectly. Also, government officials convey guidance informally to print media journalists. The chief editors of the government-owned newspapers typically hear from senior officials about how they would like an issue to be portrayed in the media, an instruction they always take seriously, although sometimes they fail to follow it. Officials also seek to provide guidance in various ways to nongovernment media, who are less likely to comply but sometimes do. All journalists must understand this fact and work accordingly. In recent surveys, many journalists say they have purposely avoided newsworthy stories, while nearly as many acknowledge they have softened the tone of stories to benefit the interests of their superiors and news organizations (Amin, 2002, p. 131).

The censorial culture thus influences the performance of Arab journalists. Concerns over charges of damaging the state national system, of defaming officers of the state, courts, and military, or of undermining the country's image, or state dignity (all are considered crimes according to the penal codes of Arab countries), impel journalists to compromise their duty to inform the public. In a recent survey, some journalists state that "they feel more comfortable reporting to the foreign press; they can speak their mind since the article will be published abroad and in a foreign language" (Amin, p. 130).

Recently, however, Egypt has made some significant strides towards the relaxing of control over the media. Private satellite channels and independent newspapers have been allowed. Combined with opposition party newspapers, these new outlets broaden the scope of opinion freedom. Yet censorship polices still exist; all broadcast materials and programs, whether locally produced or imported, have to be censored before they are aired. In contrast, locally licensed newspapers and magazines are permitted to be distributed without any kind of direct or pre-publication censorship. Foreign newspapers

have to pass through the censorship office, which bans any newspaper that questions the political, social or economic principles of the country. In this setting, the advent of the Internet, which enjoys complete and unparalleled exemption from censorship of its news stories, whether local or foreign, audiovisual or print, and which has no law specifically regulating speech online, has caused dramatic changes in the media landscape.

It is important to note that although it may be complicated for governments to censor the Internet or to establish control over the global network, it is not completely impossible to exert some control. Contrary to what cyber advocates would argue, Andrew Shapiro (1999), director of the Aspen Institute Internet Policy Project, asserts that it is possible for governments to adopt several measures to control what their citizens can read and hear online:

> Filtering software and protocols such as the Platform for Internet Content Selection (which, like barcodes on commercial packaging, standardize labels on Internet content) may make censorship easier than in the pre-digital era. Instead of confiscating underground books or pamphlets, governments can simply route all Internet communication through electronic gateways known as proxy servers. These powerful computers act as high-tech sieves, sifting out whatever is deemed subversive or offensive. China uses proxy servers to exclude a good deal of foreign content—from dissident sites to, on occasion, the New York Times and CNN. And Singapore requires Internet service providers to use filtering technology to block certain pornographic sites. Of course, there may be ways to evade such machinations, but authoritarian regimes faced with the unfettered flow of digital speech are unlikely to yield easily (1999).

Communication scholar Cees Hamelink (2000) concurs, contending that while there are significant instances in which Internet users have escaped state censorship, national governments could in principle restrict the operations of both providers and users to a considerable extent. Some regulatory measures have been already undertaken. These

measures range from "laws requiring self-censorship by ISP (Australia, 1996), obligations for Internet subscribers to register with the authorities (China, 1996), control over individual access (Cuba, 1996), legislation against Internet offences (Japan, 1996), censorship measures (Philippines, 1996, Republic of Korea, 1996), or monitoring Internet contents (Malaysia, 1996)" (2000, p. 140). However, while Internet technology is not by itself impervious to censorship, it makes such control very difficult. It is indeed difficult to silence electronic communication which occurs through a global network. Materials can be distributed through mirror sites, channels and networks. And, eventually, the censorship measures in one country can be evaded by routing the material through other countries.

Contrary to other Arab countries that use proxy servers or enact specific legislation to control the flow of information and speech online, Egypt tolerates freer expression on the Internet, than is permitted in the local news media. All media experts interviewed celebrated the freedom of censorship of the online medium. As Gamal Fahmy comments, "what is obviously distinctive about the Internet is the amount of freedom; content producers have no restrictions on what they say. And here the huge gap between what broadcast or print media present and what online sites offer becomes very clear" (Fahmy, personal communication, 2002). Ibrahim Essa claims that the Internet has changed the old formula of expression and consumption of journalism not only in Egypt but also in other Arab countries:

> The muzzled Arab press has taught journalists to use metaphors, symbols and several means of indirect expression. As well, readers have learned to read between the lines [and] to decipher the sentences and the words to get at the real meaning. The Internet has dropped all these old forms.... There

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are no restrictions on journalists to write whatever they want online and the reader can interact with this overt communication in an equally overt and direct manner. For instance, criticizing Arab presidents or kings in overt and direct—not secret or hidden—ways is common practice online. This makes the readers reevaluate the performance of opposition and independent newspapers, which presumably have a higher political ceiling.... Reading bold, critical news reports in some news sites make the reader recognize how soft and docile our Arab press is... (Essa, personal communication, 2002).

Freedom of expression on the Internet, according to Talat Romaih, allows readers "to get more accurate representations of the social and political realities and to express themselves freely in response to what they read. The Internet creates a chance to break the censorship rules in Arab countries [and] to develop news sites free of censorship" (Romaih, personal communication, 2002).

This creates a paradoxical situation in Egypt, where news articles that the authorities censor became available online without repercussions for those who read, posted, or forwarded them. According to the Human Rights Watch report (1999), "Arabic, English, and French newspapers that have been censored in Egypt, Algeria and Jordan have posted their banned stories online, where local and international readers can view them. Stories that newspapers declined to publish, due to political pressure or other factors, have circulated widely on the Internet" (1999). The Middle East Times Egypt Edition for instance, has on its website a section titled "Censored" that lists articles which were spiked by the Egyptian censor board. Likewise, the Labor Party newspaper *Al-Shaab* was banned from print publication in 2000, but it regularly publishes an online edition. Commenting on this situation, Hall (2001) argues that publishing censored articles online:

makes censorship of newspapers worse than useless since readers can clearly see exactly what it is that their government wishes to obscure.... [I]n many Arab countries the web has made government censorship of imported books, magazines and newspapers completely ineffective.... Material that has been banned is either placed on the web or bulk emailed into the countries which have suppressed it. The effect is to create a much greater stir than the original material, allowed into the public domain, would have made (2001, pp. 193-194).

Similarly, Emad Adib, editor-in- chief of the independent newspaper *Al-Alam El-Yom* argues, "the Internet and satellite television channels render censorship meaningless... [and] at the end, the reader can access all censored articles and stories. With online information sources growing and expanding, the futility of censorship becomes ever more apparent" (Adib, personal communication, 2002).

The absence of censorship has also encouraged young journalists, who express deep frustration at the degree of control and censorship exercised by editors and supervisors, to publish their articles in other news outlets on the Internet. Many Egyptian and Arab journalists now send their articles to several Arab news sites as well as to news groups, some of which have become recognized as rich with articles that had not and would never appear in the mainstream media (El-Zelaky, personal communication, 2002). Other journalists set up "private" news sites. Publishing a newspaper involves long and complicated procedures, a license must be obtained from the authorities and large amounts of money are required. Setting up an Internet news site, on the other hand, bypasses all political, legal, administrative and many financial obstacles. Some journalists have thus become publishers with full control over their site content. In general, the Internet, argues Gareeb (2000), enjoys greater freedom than any other medium in the Arab world. The absence of censorship online has also led to "an emboldening of popular

expression of opinion. It has rendered political elites somewhat vulnerable, and made their behavior subject to scrutiny more than ever before. It has helped to pave the ground for change in the political culture throughout the Arab world" (2000, p. 417).

This level of freedom has consequently also impacted the performance of the traditional media. As Jon Alterman argues, "Independent media often push boundaries, and Arab media is [sic] no exception" (2002). The advent of Egyptian opposition party newspapers, for instance, has influenced the performance of government newspapers, pushing them to be "less committed to solely expressing the government viewpoints, more daring in political coverage, more comprehensive in dealing with events and issues, and more critical about some government practices" (Mohamed, 1998, p. 171). Similarly, satellite television stations, particularly Al-Jazeera, have pushed national television services to upgrade their programs, presenting more live broadcasts, two-way communication programs, talk shows, and some political analysis and comment programs (Aloofy, 1998, p. 70). Al-Jazeera has clearly breached the existing boundaries, breaking new ground in political debate and eliminating several red lines on some of the most sensitive issues in Arab societies. In many ways, it has pressed Arab channels, including government-owned local media, to soften some of the political constraints and to enhance the level of public expression. While most of these local channels have taken an approach that can be described as "one step forward and two steps back," they would have never done so without the challenge posed by Al-Jazeera.

The online news medium, as the most recent actor to impact traditional media, has further accelerated the process of change initiated by the party press and satellite

television networks. Online news sources have used the Internet as a platform for free, democratic communication and exchange, placing new pressures on the traditional media. One manifestation of the Internet's impact on local media performance appears in the flow of content from online sources to the press, including government newspapers. *Al-Ahram Al-Arabi*, an official magazine published by the *Al-Ahram* organization, for instance, has published several articles about issues raised by the *Al-Wafd* online forum, such as the political debates by forum participants on government policies and the performance of Egyptian Ministers, published on October 5, 2002. Some of the magazine writers consider *Al-Wafd's* forum the "genuine measure of the public pulse." Said Ali, managing editor of "*Al-Ahram Al-Arab*" magazine writes that, "whoever wants to know the real opinion of the Egyptian public, without censorship and regardless of acceptance or rejection, has to go to the forum linked to the *Al-Wafd* newspaper" (Ali, *Al-Ahram Al-Arabi*, December 21, 2002). In addition, the online news coverage and the heated discussions and critical comments in the Internet forums have themselves become news for several party and independent newspapers. The Internet also sensitizes journalists to readers' responses to their articles and their news coverage. As Gamal Fahmy comments, "by providing the easiest and most effective means to interact with journalists, via E-mail, chat rooms, and forums, the Internet creates a level of relationship between the reader and the writer, which has never existed before.... This relationship makes the reader more present in the writer's mind and this deeply influences the writer's performance" (Fahmy, personal communication, 2002).

Despite their acknowledgement of the Internet's impact on the traditional media, most experts interviewed were quick to point out the novelty of the online medium, a situation that makes definitive answers to the question of the further influence of the Internet difficult to gauge. Yet it is clear that the Internet restructures the media-scape, allowing Egyptian users exposure to information and news sources from around the world and further decreasing the ability of the government to directly or indirectly affect what the public sees and hears. It provides readers with a more varied way of consuming information and an effective means for participation. The overt challenge to censorship mechanisms and the pressure on national media to broaden political and cultural debates can be a force for change, making issues of censorship less salient. In a relatively information-poor environment, Alterman (2000) argues, the combined effects of new information technologies can induce dramatic structural change (2000, p. 357). This may well be the case in Egypt in future years. The Internet and satellite networks have disseminated an increased number and diversity of sources of information, which are uncontrolled by political elites. They thus offer a prospect for greater liberalization of the media environment in the coming years. These developments constitute a key factor in bolstering the emerging public sphere with unprecedented opportunities for participation and more space for political debate.

The Internet and the Emerging Public Sphere

The role of the media in providing opportunities for political participation and democratic discourse becomes more explicit in Habermas's theorizing about the concept

of the "public sphere." Habermas (1989/1962) used historical analysis to describe the notion of the "public sphere" as based on that part of social life, where citizens discuss issues of common concern. The outcome of their rational critical debate, he calls public opinion. Habermas traces the evolution of the "bourgeois public sphere"—an autonomous public space between the private domain and the state—to the 17th and 18th centuries, when public places such as coffee houses and salons first became centers of critical political discussion, and extends this to an ideal of participation in the public sphere of today. Nancy Fraser (1992) explains Habermas's principles:

> The idea of public sphere... designates a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk. It is the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, and hence an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction. This arena is conceptually distinct from the state; it is a site for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state. The public sphere in Habermas's sense is also conceptually distinct from the official economy; it is not an arena of market relations but rather one of discursive relations; a theater for debating and deliberating rather than for buying and selling (1992, pp. 110-111).

Habermas's ideal of free-flowing public conversation is characterized by rational-critical debate as the standard for argument, the bracketing of status differentials so that participants speak as if they were equals, the potential to problematize any topic of discussion, and a conception of "the public" that is inclusive in principle (Calhoun, 1992, p. 13). He emphasizes the critical role of the media in constituting the public sphere in modern societies. In his historical analysis, he outlines the development of newspapers at the turn of the 18th century, commenting that the press "was for the first time established as a genuinely critical organ of a public engaged in critical political debate: as the fourth estate" (Habermas, 1989, p. 60). Ultimately, the public sphere comes to be defined in

relation to the mass media, which can serve as a conduit for rational-critical debate and provide the basis for informed opinion and the opportunity for public expression (Bentivegna, 2002, p. 52).

Almost every aspect of Habermas's early ideas have been criticized and debated, rejected and reshaped. Habermas's critics argue that he idealizes the liberal public sphere as a space of rational discussion and consensus. According to Douglas Kellner (2001),

> It is doubtful if democratic politics were ever fueled by norms of rationality or public opinion formed by rational debate and consensus to the extent stylized in Habermas's concept of the bourgeois public sphere. Politics throughout the modern era have been subject to the play of interests and power as well as discussion and debate. It is probably only a few Western bourgeois societies that have developed any public sphere at all in Habermas's sense, and while it is salutary to construct models of a good society that could help to realize agreed upon democratic and egalitarian values, it is a mistake to overly idealize and universalize any specific public sphere as in Habermas's account (Kellner, 2001).

Other critics argue that despite the rhetoric about inclusiveness and accessibility, the bourgeois public sphere rests on a number of significant exclusions. Dominated by white, property-owing males, the bourgeois public sphere is constituted by "masculinist ideology," excluding women of all classes and ethnicities and ignoring their discussions of public issues in spheres relevant to them (Fraser, 1992, p. 118). Furthermore, in his conception of the public sphere, Habermas "neglects the importance of the contemporaneous development of a plebeian public sphere alongside and in opposition to the bourgeois public sphere, a sphere built upon different institutional forms... and with different values" (Garnham, 1992, p. 359). In *Further Reflections on the Public Sphere* (1992), Habermas recognizes this point, writing that he now realizes that "from the

beginning a dominant bourgeois public collides with a plebeian one" and that he "underestimated" the significance of oppositional and non-bourgeois public spheres (1992, p. 430). Hence, the public sphere, according to several critics, is not a singular entity, but rather a conglomeration of smaller public spheres organized around ideology, identity and gender. These public spheres, which give voice to collective identities and interests, are not equally powerful, articulate and privileged. The criticisms of Habermas's approach, however, do not detract from the significance of the central thrust of his argument. The concept of the public sphere still offers a powerful vision of the democratic role of the media in society, focusing analysis on the central link between "the institutions and practices of mass public communication and the institutions and practices of democratic policies" and calling attention to the material communicative conditions needed for democratic public discourse (Garnham, 1992, pp. 360-361).

Unlike Western media that have a high degree of freedom, sustained by a liberal democratic infrastructure of laws and parliamentary institutions which are presently being challenged by commercial culture in capitalist societies, Arab media can by no means be described as having the communicative environment that gives rise to "unrestricted" rational-critical discussion of public matters. Nevertheless, they too have benefited from the political liberalization processes that are unfolding in many Arab societies, including Egypt. Although both terms of "liberalization" and "democratization" are usually conflated in popular and academic discussion, it is important to differentiate between them to clarify the social and political order within which the Arab media operate. As Brynen, Korany and Noble (1995) argue:

Political liberalization involves the expansion of public space through the recognition and protection of civil and political liberties, particularly those bearing upon the ability of citizens to engage in free political discourse and to freely organize in pursuit of common interests. Political democratization entails an expansion of political participation in such a way as to provide citizens with a degree of real and meaningful collective control over public policies... [I]t is possible to have elements of one without the other. Political repression can be relaxed without expanding political participation.... Conversely, some political systems may claim widespread popular participation... while restricting political freedoms (1995, pp. 3-4).

As a result of the liberalization process, both the party and an independent press have been developed in Egypt. As well, the government press, by way of responding to pressures, has occasionally invited critical writers to contribute their views and analysis of social and political issues. These developments have enhanced the discursive role of the press and promoted its function as a public space for critical debate that involves multiple political voices. The state, however, still maintains an overwhelming advantage over any possible opponent in the public sphere by controlling the most powerful and widest-reaching media in Egypt: television and radio, both of which are state monopolies. As well, the partial representations of critical views in the government press do not form a genuine threat to the hegemonic discourse of the political elite.

The advent of the Internet, however, is a large step forward in expanding and further liberalizing the public sphere. Communication networks on the Internet, which escape censorship and place no limitations on the free flow of public information, provide a genuine public space for processing, synthesizing and filtering information and debate, and thus lead to discursive public opinion formation among new publics in the Arab states. As Internet access expanded in the late 1990s, Egyptians began to use the

technology to debate current events, to criticize the government, public officials and political parties and to share personal experiences, to propose solutions to current social problems, and to construct different visions of the country's future. These discussions take place in several online communication spaces such as E-mail lists, chat rooms and websites. However, a key arena for these debates are online news sources, which usually attract many more people than the lesser-known newsgroups, bulletin boards, or chat rooms. Several Arab and Egyptian online news sites have established forums based on current events, inciting public expression of opinions and political deliberation. These sites have become an important locus for arguments over the meanings of democracy, identity and human rights in Egypt and other Arab societies.

As a public space, the Internet has several communicative features that promote unbounded information dissemination and interactive participation in critical debate. Commenting on these communicative capacities, Anderson and Eickelman (1999) argue,

> [The Internet] brings into the public arena conventions and practices of face-to-face communication that mass communications had relegated to a "private" realm, expanding their reach and what is in public. This may be more significant in the longer term than the possibilities for media celebrity as the public sphere is enriched not just by more players but by more conversations and more ways for consumers/recipients to recognize themselves and their lives in public discourse (1999).

In many ways, the Internet has strong democratic proclivities, serving as a vast forum that represents the views of diverse social groups. Open access to online communication spaces permits an increasing number of relevant voices to be heard, leads to a multiplication of actors and to ideational pluralism in an ever wider and more diverse public realm. In Egypt, the Internet provides numerous avenues for individuals and civil

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society organizations to engage in political debate. Journalists, writers, intellectuals, human rights defenders and political activists have embraced the Internet as a space for public discussions. Many of them contribute their opinions to online forums (e.g. *Egyptian Talks*, *Arabia* and *Arabic Media Internet Network*). Others express their views by sending messages to mailing lists (e.g. *Arabian 2000*). Some of them establish their own websites to give their views and opinions greater exposure. Ordinary citizens have become such active participants in many online forums that some describe this phenomenon as the emergence of "Internet Parties." In his assessment of online forum activities, published on the news web site, *Elaph*, Abd El-Karim Hashish wrote:

> The Internet offers a vast array of news and political analyses that escape censorship, in addition to a growing number of online forums and chat-rooms that provide a *safe* place to debate all sensitive issues and subjects without fear or timidity... In this context, Internet users, particularly the youth, embrace this new platform, forming what might be called 'Internet Parties'.... In these forums, opposing views to official policies and criticisms of government practices have been formed.... This new development will lead to the creation of new pressure groups; and governments will no longer be able to ignore their questions or the sensitive issues they debate (Hashish, March 24, 2002).

In the 2000 parliamentary election, some independent candidates, who had no access to traditional media, established their own web sites to motivate followers, increase support, report on their campaigns, assail the ruling party's practices, and more importantly, present alternative political views (e.g. Sayyed Abd El-Ati's web site, http://swtelganob.4t.com/mnagl.html). Similarly, the Muslim Brotherhood Group, which is illegal and prohibited from openly campaigning or participating in elections under its own banner, established an election web site for its members who were running for office as independents (http://albehira2000.faithweb.com/Pages/Start.htm). In turn, citizens

were able to provide those candidates with direct feedback through E-mail. Although the Internet was only used by a small group of candidates and the web sites established were not very sophisticated, these uses are testament to the Internet's potential as a channel for political information and debate in the society. Recently, the *Al-Wafd* party has used the Internet to create a virtual model of the Egyptian Parliament (http://www.mep-egy.org/). In the introductory page of the model web site, Heba Negm, the director of the model, declared that the virtual Parliament, which simulates the organization of the People's Assembly with its sub-committees and divisions, aims to present the dynamics of parliamentary practices to young people between the ages of 16 and 27 and to encourage them to take part in the discussion of national political and economic issues, express their ideas and views, and develop recommendations and action plans. "It is an excellent exercise for the youth," she asserts, "to develop their analytic and discursive skills and to express their views in a democratic and free environment that represents different political powers in society."

Civil society organizations also use the Internet to expand their reach and to participate in the public dialogue. While nobody can claim that a comprehensive civil society exists in any Arab country, argues Mostapha Al-Sayyid (1995), there are some countries where civil society has made large strides. This emergent civil society exists in countries that "allow a reasonable measure of freedom of association, authorizing political parties and permitting the establishment of various types of professional associations, class-based organizations and private societies" (1995, p. 141). Civil society organizations, however, face major challenges in communicating their aims and the

importance of their contributions to society. Just beginning to join in social and political debates is a formidable challenge. The Internet has allowed these organizations to establish their respective web sites to support their activities in a variety of ways. Several professional associations, non-governmental organizations, business groups, trade unions, private societies (i.e. social clubs, literary and scientific societies, religious associations, and women's and youth's groups) now deploy the Internet to expand their influence in public affairs and in public discourse. Their online activities include disseminating information and news, organizing online campaigns, and fostering grass-roots deliberation and debate. Through E-mail, online forums and web sites, Egyptian and Arab human rights groups spread information on different human rights issues such as the threats to freedom of expression, and sensitize local populations and the international community far more effectively than before (e.g. *The Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, Center For Human Rights Legal Aid, Arab Organization for Human Rights,* and *Legal Research and Resource Center for Human rights*).

Furthermore, as the Internet facilitates participation regardless of the geographic location of users, an increasing number of Egyptian expatriates—intellectuals, scientists, students, migrant laborers, and general members of immigrant communities in North America, Europe and Australia—contribute to the public debate. As Alterman (1999) argues, one of the most significant results of the new transnational media is the extent to which they have allowed the reintegration of Arab expatriates into Arab life and society. "No longer cut off from their homelands, many Arabs living in the West read Arab newspapers (either in print or on the Internet), watch Arab [satellite] television ... and

actively seek out Arab sites on the Internet" (1999). The contribution of Egyptian expatriates enriches public dialogue, bringing new perspectives, insights and experiences to the interpretations of local realities and to the discussion of social and political issues. They spread images of other lives and ideas of change. In many online forums, there is a remarkable cross-fertilization of ideas between Egyptian compatriots living abroad and those that remain in Egypt.

Similarly, debates over Arab political, cultural and social issues have become more open to participation from citizens of all Arab countries. In this respect, some public forums, particularly those linked with the online Arab portals and satellite networks' sites (e.g. *Al-Bawaba*, *Arabia*, *Naseej* and *Al-Jazeera*), have been developed as arenas for regional dialogue among Arabs. They have expanded the boundaries of debate in the Arab world by injecting new viewpoints into areas where such discussions had been relatively rare. As Gareeb (2000) argues, the growth of satellite networks and the Internet have broadened the cross-border discourse. They have given Arabs all over the Arab world the opportunity not only to receive more reliable news and analysis but more importantly to "learn more about each other... encouraging increasing cultural unity among the Arabs by acknowledging their diversity, by helping to reflect and mobilize public opinion on issues of common concern, and by overcoming some narrow regional loyalties" (2000, p. 416). This regional debate has the potential to evolve into a common Arab political agenda, and, perhaps more importantly, a more active and involved Arab citizenry.

The Internet thus provides more information to citizens and more convenient ways for participation, making it possible for individuals and groups to reach out to citizens directly and restructure public affairs. However, there are a number of barriers to Internet access that limit participation in this emerging public space. Issues of income, education and computer literacy limit access to the upper and upper-middle classes and better educated citizens, thus excluding a large sector of the populace from participation. This drives some critics to argue that "the electronic public sphere is exclusive, elitist, and far from ideal, not terribly different from the bourgeois public sphere" (Papacharissi, 2002, p. 14). However, considering the media regime in Egypt and the restricted access to public communication forums, the Internet represents a real opportunity for personal expression and public discussion, even though this is only a privilege of those with access to computers and the Internet. The efficacy of the Internet as a public space indeed rests on its capacity to serve as an open forum for debating the crucial political and social issues that are given limited airing by the other media, and its greater degree of freedom that encourages participants to question all aspects of public affairs. In this sense, the Internet is an influential but "partial" public sphere for a segment of the population which has no other means for participation, and is likely to spread online information and debates to fellow citizens who have no access, thus moving the political debate to wider circles. Bearing in mind that no sphere is totally inclusive, the Internet is an additional channel that, combined with the party and independent newspapers, presents alternative voices and views, develops discussion and debate on public issues and therefore enlarges and further liberates the national public sphere.

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Looking at the conversation, taking place in several online forums and E-mail lists, it becomes clear that there are some elements that characterize the online discussion. First, conversation on the Internet presents interesting possibilities for equality. This element of equality has its most visible indicator in the absence of preconceived positions of 'power' in the management of the communication exchange. Although some forums employ a host or a moderator, their jobs are generally reduced to maintaining the broad guidelines of the forum and to controlling any verbal abuses, if they happen in the discussion. The host thus does not act as an "institutional figure," leading the debate. All members have the chance to participate on an equal footing and status markers are eliminated. Second, everyday experience becomes a significant reference point for shaping the character of the discussion. As participants use the information that their lifeworld offers for interpreting the debated topics, everyday experience has been foregrounded as a significant element in the mediation of political discussion. In many forums, participants not only debate current public issues, but also reflect on their experiences from past political eras. In so doing, the forum becomes a place for forming popular or collective memories of the recent past. Third, while the entire media system has a great impact on the construction of frames of reference within which topics are introduced and interpreted, the Internet news medium itself provides the material out of which the argument among participants is developed. The Internet thus "takes the form of both a 'source' and a 'tool' that allows interactive communication" (Bentivegna, 2002, p. 53). Lastly, the disappearance of censorship, the unlimited freedom of expression and the potential for anonymity help shape the structures of deliberation, fostering an influx of

"critical" arguments. The Internet evolves into a means by which those who have alternative views can bring these on to the public agenda. In many forums, participants publicly appreciate the freedom of expression on the Internet and consider online forums a chance for them to be more vocal and forthright about stating and developing their social and political beliefs.

Conclusion

While it is almost impossible to predict the long-term impact of the new communication technologies and the ways in which users actively appropriate them to develop new cultural practices, it is clear that dramatic changes are afoot, capable of inducing structural transformations in the media regime in Egypt. New media, particularly satellite television networks and the Internet, have opened new markets and given rise to new actors, while challenging, at the same time, the traditional media and censorship mechanisms. They can be regarded as a force in broadening media freedom, facilitating the flow of cultural and political content around barriers previously erected. Satellite television stations, particularly Al-Jazeera, have clearly broken new ground, addressing all relevant issues, including the weakness of democratic institutions, fundamentalism, state corruption, political inequality, and human rights violations. Political leaders are held to greater account than ever before, and opposing views are brought into the discussion.

The Internet offers new patterns of production and consumption of media content. A connection to the Internet increases citizens' access to information, putting within easy

reach one of the world's great sources of information and news, much of it free and continuously updated. Communication on the Internet is unstructured by the existing canons of traditional media. It helps to level the asymmetrical relations between the sender and the receiver, making the consumption of media more reciprocal and putting an unaccustomed measure of agency in the hands of the user. Instead of being positioned only to receive the views and arguments of others (politicians, journalists, and experts), ordinary people are able to contribute their own opinions and interpretations of relevant issues and events.

Computer-mediated communication can play a significant part in fostering grass-roots deliberation and debate, paving the way for a liberalized public sphere and further challenging the dominance of the state in the public domain. The Internet thus, through democratizing the means of media production, permits new actors to express themselves publicly. Civil society organizations use the medium to exercise their power in the public domain and therefore go some way toward balancing the power differential between the state and society. Despite their modest resources and limited access to the traditional news media, civil society organizations disseminate information widely, rapidly and inexpensively, eliciting reactions from within intellectual circles and ushering in a new lobbying power for civic discourse. Individual actors in the Egyptian diaspora, other Arab countries and Egypt itself use online forums to expose issues and create debates in a way that is not comparable to their past experience of public discourse. The intense engagement of Internet users inside and outside Egypt in public debate heralds the Internet's new position as a political medium that nurtures the development of public

dialogue. Yet, while the medium presents great opportunities, many obstacles remain before participation can be truly inclusive. Even though there are no legal barriers to Internet access in Egypt, economic and educational barriers are extremely high, keeping the Internet beyond the realm of the majority of Egyptian citizens. It is a force in changing the media environment and expanding public spaces, but it is still far from being recognized as a popular medium.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Technological systems are socially produced, and social production is culturally informed. The Internet is no exception to this rule. Initially designed by the American military as a communication network which could withstand the ravages of a nuclear attack, the Internet is based on a multi-layered, decentralized structure. The flat hierarchy and open access of the Internet are features that facilitate cooperation and sharing. Among the first practical applications of the Internet was the sharing of data between remote sites. By transferring documents electronically, individuals are able to send original computer-produced documents—text, audio and video files—with ease and reliability. Documents can be easily transferred anywhere on the Internet and shared widely among its users. According to Anderson (1999a), engineers and applied scientists developed the Internet as a tool for collaborative work by building "into it open access... freedom of information, and, more subtly, notions of transient, purposive connections among people and between pieces of information. Their Internet is organized not so much around transmission as around sharing of information. Their scheme, in turn, diffused to and was taken up by the larger world of higher education and allied activities and, subsequently, in an increasingly commercial communication ecology of business and leisure" (1999a, p. 44).

The culture of the producers of the Internet thus shaped the medium. Castells (2001) proposes a four-level model to describe the 'cultures' that produced the Internet. These are the techno-meritocratic culture, the hacker culture, the virtual communitarian culture and the entrepreneurial culture. He argues that the culture of the Internet is made up of a "technocratic belief in the progress of humans through technology, enacted by communities of hackers thriving on free and open technological creativity, embedded in virtual networks aimed at reinventing society, and materialized by money-driven entrepreneurs into the working of the new economy" (2001, p. 61). Many varied communities of producers, developers and users have emerged at different points throughout the ongoing process of the construction of the Internet. Their activities have moved and continue to move the technology beyond its original purposes, extending its repertoire, and forming an inclusive, flexible and dynamic communications framework (Flanagin, Farinola, & Metzger, 2000, pp. 415-416).

The introduction of the Internet into different societies and cultures initiates new processes of social construction, as different social interest groups and actors engage in a cultural struggle to define and shape the technology, influence its development and mediate its implications. One major aim of this dissertation has been to deconstruct the social construction of the Internet in the Egyptian context—to expose the technology's social and cultural components. These components include the values and interests of the developers, the national administrative and regulatory regimes, and the choices and cultural practices of the end-users. As was discussed in chapter two, the development of the Internet in Egypt is based on a partnership between the government and the private

sector. Government officials promote the use of the Internet in several economic, social and cultural domains. They believe the Internet has the capacity to stimulate socio-economic development, private sector growth and expansion of the market economy. Moreover, it is the government's view that the Internet can help transform Egypt into a knowledge-based society, enabling it to draw closer to Western countries in social and economic dimensions, and securing Egypt's leading position in the Arab region. Among these competing values and uses, the economic and business priorities have gained the upper hand.

Pro-Internet elites in the private sector tend to be business people who are more interested in developing business via the Internet than in developing the Internet itself. Through their partnership with the government, they have pushed to expand e-commerce and e-business. This explains in part why Internet development in Egypt reflects a bias toward commercial uses and values. Further, the Egyptian regulatory system favors the commercial functions of the Internet, rather than its educational, research or public service functions.

The perceived importance of the Internet in the economic sphere provides a strong incentive for the government to extend Internet connectivity, and this overshadows any desire to control this technology whether through censorship or restrictions on access. This open environment allows different groups to appropriate the technology for new cultural and communicative practices, and what was meant to be a medium for business is used for a wide variety of different purposes. Various social and political groups, as well as civil society organizations, have brought other values and interests to the social

shaping of the Internet. These actors use the Internet as a source for information, a forum for free expression and a space to promote their own activities and views. By using the computer-based network, they are able to disseminate information, expose issues and create debates, potentially provoking significant reactions within intellectual circles. These alternate uses 'enculturate' the Internet with values other than the economic ones.

Journalists and the press have been among the first to use the Internet in Egypt. A growing number of journalists, particularly in party and independent newspapers, have used this new technology to collect information and access international reports about Egypt and the Arab World. Reports of such international organizations as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have been mentioned in articles in party and independent newspapers which include explicit references to these organization's online sites. These uses of the Internet demonstrate the importance of this medium as a source of information not only in journalists' circles, but also among readers, who have begun to embrace the Internet as a valuable and reliable source of news otherwise unavailable. According to user surveys, getting news and information has become the most important use of the Internet for Egyptians (e.g. El-Nawawy, 1998; Abd El-Salam, 1998; Taye, 2000).

Taking advantage of the Internet as a medium for electronic publishing, many Egyptian newspapers and magazines have established their own news sites, making their content available online. In addition, several dedicated online news sites and general Internet portals that offer some news services have also been established. The increasing presence of Egyptian and Arab online news sources, as well as the seemingly infinite

number of foreign media and world news agency sites have contributed to the development of the Internet as an open, free and comprehensive news environment.

The increasing significance of the online news medium in Egypt makes it important to raise questions about the nature of this medium, its capabilities and limitations, and its place within the traditional print and broadcast media landscapes. The other major research aim of this dissertation has been to raise these questions and, hopefully, provide some answers. As we have seen in chapter three, contrary to what some media critics assume about new digital media, the Internet does not have to divorce itself completely from earlier media to establish its new aesthetic and cultural principles. Instead, the Internet achieves its cultural significance precisely by paying homage to, rivaling and refashioning such earlier media. Bolter and Grusin call this process of refashioning "remediation," and argue that new media can never operate in isolation. "Such isolation does not seem possible for us today, when we cannot even recognize the representational power of a medium except with reference to other media" (1999, p. 65).

The Internet news medium thus appropriates the techniques, forms and social roles of older news media and attempts to remodel them in its own image. It strives to overcome the bounds of older media and present itself as an improved medium by deploying the mutually constructive styles of remediation, immediacy and hypermediacy, in strategic ways. The Internet news medium attempts to achieve transparent immediacy by ignoring or denying the presence of the medium and the very act of mediation. This immediacy derives in large part from the Internet's interactivity, allowing the user of the online news medium greater control over the communication process. Since the

architecture of the Internet is based on networked, interactive communication models, high degrees of responsiveness and transparency are built into the structure of the medium. The reader is provided with an immediated experience: he/she can negotiate different methods of news selection, modify the order of the text by pursuing hyperlinks, transcend limitations of time and space, and communicate with journalists and other readers, offering suggestions, making comments or even starting discussion on issues in the news.

The Internet news medium achieves hypermediacy by emphasizing multiple acts of representation and marking the presence of older media. The very act of remediation and the multiple strategies of refashioning visual and verbal media—providing text, graphics, sound, animation and moving images in digital forms—ensure that the older media cannot be entirely effaced, and thus the online medium can never be completely transparent. This hypermediated nature of the Internet gives rise to heterogeneous multimedia spaces, offering a rich and inclusive news environment that strives for multiplicity and completeness in the communication experience, while, at the same time, offering the reader new transparency by incorporating transparent media—animation, video and audio news materials—that cannot appear in print news media.

The case studies of *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd* reveal the social and cultural components of the new technological system of the Internet news medium. They expose what Ursula Franklin (1992) has termed "formalized practices" and "specialized knowledges." Online news producers believe that the Internet is a new communication space, which restructures the ways in which news is produced and presented, and which

challenges the practices of print journalism. It has the capacity to overcome some of the temporal restrictions which constrain print news production. The interactive capabilities of the Internet can alter traditional relationships in the news industry, removing the one-way directionality of traditional media and re-inventing the role of news producers to make them more creatively engaged with their audiences. Hypertext has changed the form of the news story: embedded links to other relevant documents offer historical accounts and contextualized information, thus better situating the news story within a field of relations and connections, most of which conventional media keep out of sight and relatively difficult to follow. The digital integration of all media types gives the Internet news medium great synthetic capabilities.

The advent of the online news medium thus represents a change in media culture, leading to a new mindset for many online journalists. The online news medium also gives rise, however, to contradictions and tensions within the traditional newspaper culture. *Al-Ahram* organization provides a clear example of this cultural clash. As we have seen in chapter three, there is a clash between the communication culture of the Internet and the values of *Al-Ahram* online editors on the one hand, and the culture of the newspaper and the values of *Al-Ahram* managing editors on the other. Online editors develop new conceptions and practices relevant to the online news world, challenging traditional newspaper practices and employing new models of news production; in contrast, managing editors insist on continuity and resemblance between the online and print news products and force the online journalists to adhere to the traditional norms of the newspaper, even though these may be impractical in and irrelevant to the online world.

Al-Ahram and *Al-Wafd* online editors emphasize different structural features of the online news product and approach the online medium in different manners. Based on these differences in both their conceptualization of the Internet medium and their work practices, two distinct online news approaches can be identified in Egypt. The first approach is based on the transmission model of the traditional print and broadcast media. It focuses on presenting and improving editorial content through the use of hyperlinks and multimedia, offering little in the way of interactive communication to readers. This approach guarantees a one-way flow of information with control remaining in the hands of organizational gatekeepers. The second approach is based on a networked communication model. Its major focus is how to utilize the Internet as an interlinked discussion and feedback platform. The online news medium, according to this model, is an open, participatory space that flattens out the print media hierarchy and endows users with greater communication power. Readers can contribute their interpretations of news stories, share comments and ideas, and engage in public discussions in an open publishing environment, impeded by no filtering interventions from the editors.

The case studies of *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd* also reveal two different models of constructing online audiences. The first model, which is based on the transmission approach and which treats the online product as a substitute for the newspaper, focuses primarily on the long-distance market where the print edition of the newspaper is not readily available. The institutional image of online audiences thus comprises only those who are geographically located outside Egypt. In contrast, the networked approach favors an interactive communication experience dissimilar to that of the print medium. It

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presents the online news product not as a substitute for the newspaper but as supplementary to it. As a result, the networked approach targets a large number of readers, regardless of their geographical location. The institutional image of the audience encompasses readers in local as well as long-distance markets.

News production for the online medium, like all social production, is a complex process, which must be analyzed on several levels. At the industrial and institutional level, online news is shaped by economic arrangements of media organizations situated in their particular socioeconomic systems. At the organizational level, online news is the outcome of the work routines of journalists and the policies and constraints of news organizations. At the individual level, online news is the product of journalists' socially-shaped practices and values. The study of the online news products of *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd* reveal that Internet news production is an adapted gate-keeping process: it is influenced by institutional constraints, online news editors' values and the special capacities of the Internet medium (for example, the ability potential to track audiences, their preferences and even the reading paths they follow). Interviews with online editors at *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd* reveal that online news products are subordinate to newspapers and generally constrained by the print materials. For the most part, the online editors perform a second-level gatekeeping role, repurposing print news stories for the online medium. News decision-making processes in the online environment are often controlled by a single editor and are much more streamlined than their counterparts in traditional news media. This organizational framework steers online journalists to work according to the news organization's expectations. News selection is also the outcome of the perceived

audience's interests and values, and it is shaped in part by the interactive capabilities of the online medium itself.

With the analysis of print and online news content in *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd* in chapter four, it is possible to outline the process of gatekeeping in the online news products in Egypt. Online news products tend to be hard-news oriented, emphasizing political issues. Although the online products present a mix of national, regional and international news stories, they do not reflect the full range of news content available in print. They display a greater concentration of national news. The content of the online news products is also predominantly staff-generated. The online medium in Egypt is clearly structured as a political platform; it is used by news organizations to construct their organizational self-images as well as to develop images of Egyptian society for the world to consume. The online news products thus focus on news stories and editorials that capture the political stances of the organizations which own them, exposing their political biases. For instance, *Al-Ahram*, the government news organization, often refrains from publishing critical reports of political and economic practices of the government on the Internet, even though it publishes critical reports of the government's performance in its newspaper. *Al-Wafd*, as an opposition party news organization, is inclined to stress its opposition stance online more vehemently than it does in its newspaper, which often tries to strike a balance between opposing and endorsing government policies.

The pride of place given to national stories in the online news products is used to carve out a niche on the Internet where numerous sources from around the world already provide up-to-the-minute, first-hand coverage of regional and international news. The

tendency to publish more staff-produced stories reflects a common desire of news organizations in Egypt to inform the global audience about significant national and international events from their own perspectives and to provide what other online news sources cannot offer.

The structural features of the online medium reshape news content in a unique way. Traditional print and broadcast media are self-enclosed entities that categorize information within spatial and temporal contexts. In contrast, the Internet, as an open, interactive medium, presents new forms of communication based on an altered style of text organization, a greater breadth of contextualized information and expanded interpretive boundaries. The involvement of readers in content creation provides different viewpoints and situates news stories in alternative contexts. Their discussion of news issues often redirects the meaning of certain news stories and negates attempts to provide definitive closure, as is attempted in print editorials. The interactive character of the medium moves the interpretation of news into the social sphere, distancing the online medium from its traditional predecessors, where opinions and comments remain the nearly exclusive purview of editors. The unique characteristics of the Internet not only restructure the content but also have a democratizing potential, capable of altering the relationship between readers and media producers. Content production is moved from a hierarchical to a more egalitarian arrangement; communities of users can exchange their ideas, opinions and beliefs in various interactive spaces and mobilize around specific issues or stories. Rather than presenting a static representation of the world created by a few privileged authors, online news sites open up a struggle over the creation of meanings.

The Internet news medium, as we have seen in this dissertation, has new communication capabilities and takes a novel approach to content production and consumption. It features new forms of representation and new ways of negotiating meaning. The intense engagement of Egyptian users in different online news spaces and the multiple ways in which they use Internet technology for participatory communication and self-articulation establish a unique position for this medium in the Egyptian media landscape. As was documented in chapter two, Egyptian media since their inception with newspapers in the nineteenth century and radio in the early twentieth century have been placed under a range of social and political controls. In the post-independence era, successive Egyptian governments have consolidated their grip on the media through inhibitive media laws and codes, promulgating official definitions of media rights and duties. From the points of view of these governments, press freedom was to be sacrificed in the interests of national unity, political stability and social harmony. Government officials have consistently argued that speaking with a national voice is so important that it requires the silencing of dissent.

The media are thus used as a tool for political control and they are instrumental in spreading dominant ideas. The print media operate under several control mechanisms: one is political. The government deploys its law-making, censoring and regulatory powers against unruly media and journalists. Another control mechanism is economic. By owning the most widely circulated newspapers and controlling the state's advertising expenditures, printing presses and distribution facilities, the government can place various forms of economic pressure on the press. A third control mechanism is cultural. Since the

government controls personnel assignments, all directors and chief editors of official newspapers are appointed based on their loyalty to the political elite. They ensure a total subordination of the official newspaper to the political regime, contributing substantially to the maintenance of the political and social systems and the dominant elite values.

The various control mechanisms have spawned self-censorship among journalists, who often censor themselves when covering sensitive issues. The broadcast media also face considerable government control and censorship. The Egyptian Radio and Television Union, the sole authority in Egypt which can establish and own radio and television stations, has the power to censor all audio/visual materials, and it comes under the direct supervision of the Minister of Communication. All materials and programs have to be scanned by the censors before they are broadcast. The structure of the broadcast media is thus highly centralized. Although the state has recently established a number of local television channels, the control pattern remains unchanged. These local stations have failed to serve as vehicles for fostering communication pluralism.

In the last two decades, however, the Egyptian government's tight hold on media operations began to loosen. The party press became more active and critical of the government; the official press began to diversify its political views; the private sector gained a foothold in the Egyptian press and satellite broadcasting systems. Yet, despite these improvements, media experts interviewed for this dissertation still believe that the official news media narrow rather than widen the scope of political discourse. They consider the broadcast media and official newspapers controlled spaces for marketing the

government's policies and managing public opinion. Legal restrictions and the limited leeway for interpretive independence curtail critical investigative reporting. In addition, the dominance of entertainment programs relative to information programming in the broadcast media is considered a clear indication that television producers are more interested in distracting viewers than encouraging them to actively participate in local affairs. While some media experts criticize the partisan loyalties that color the coverage of the party newspapers, others say such criticism is unfair to these papers because they as well as independent newspapers are so constrained by political and economic pressures.

Media experts view the Internet as a unique news medium that is beginning to induce remarkable transformations in the Egyptian media scene. It provides Egyptian readers with more diversified and interactive access to numerous news sources. Along with pan-Arab newspapers and satellite television networks, particularly Al-Jazeera, the Internet partly undermines the privileged status of the official media, placing pressure on the government to lessen its control over information provided to the public. It is the consensus of media experts that the online news medium can circumvent restrictions on information flow and pluralize the Egyptian audience's understanding of its realities. It offers a diversity of values and perspectives, helping individual users to reinterpret and question the agenda and ideas presented in the traditional news media. It also gives ordinary readers easy access to media professionals, permitting them to express their opinions and to make their needs and desires known. Because massive capital investments are not needed to build Internet news sites, a new breed of media producers can enter the field of online publishing, spreading alternative ideas, information and news about

politics, economics, religion, culture and society. The interactive capabilities of the Internet give a voice to the public and create a realm of mixed discourses, something that has been traditionally absent from the conventional mass media. Mixed discourses arise when readers post their views, thoughts and comments alongside published news articles. The intense engagement of Egyptian Internet users in news forums underscores their new privileged position as interpreters, people who openly share their own reading of public affairs.

More importantly, media experts believe that the online news medium breaks free from the censorial political culture that deeply affects the traditional print and broadcast media not only in Egypt, but in all Arab countries as well. In the post-independence era, local political and social arrangements produced highly centralized communication systems geared exclusively toward nation-building goals; the censorial culture emerged during this period, forcing journalists to compromise their duty to inform the public. In contrast to the traditional media in Egypt, the Internet enjoys a complete exemption from censorship with no law specifically regulating speech online. This freedom of expression on the Internet, some media experts argue, allows readers to get more accurate representations of social and political realities, and decreases the ability of the government to directly or indirectly affect what the public sees and hears. The online news medium, some media experts believe, changes the old formula of journalism, permitting journalists to drop all indirect forms of opinion expression, and alleviating the need for readers to decipher the content and to read between the lines to get at the real meaning. The Internet renders censorship meaningless since censored stories can easily

be published online and accessed by local and international readers. The newfound freedom of expression emboldens popular expression of opinion, and makes political elites somewhat vulnerable as their behavior becomes subject to more scrutiny than ever before. The challenge to censorship mechanisms and the pressure on national media to broaden political and cultural debates can be forces for even greater liberalization of the media environment and for bolstering the emerging public sphere in Egypt.

As was discussed in chapter five, open access to online communication spaces permits an increasing number of relevant voices to be heard. There is a multiplication of actors, fostering ideational pluralism in a more diverse public realm. The Internet provides numerous avenues for individuals and civil society organizations to engage in political debate. Participating in online forums, sending messages to news groups and even establishing their own web sites, journalists, writers, intellectuals, human rights defenders and political activists use the Internet as a space for public discussions. Similarly, a growing number of civil society organizations, including human rights organizations, have established their own sites to expand their influence on public affairs and public discourse. Their online activities include disseminating information and news, organizing online campaigns, and encouraging grass-roots deliberation and debate. The Internet also allows a transnational public dialogue: individuals from Arab countries and Egyptian expatriates bring new perspectives, insights and experiences to the interpretation of local realities and the discussion of social and political issues.

Given the restrictive traditional media regime in Egypt, the Internet represents a real opportunity for those interested in widening the breadth of personal expression and

public discussion in Egyptian society. It serves as an open forum for debating the political and social issues that are given limited airing by other media; the greater degree of freedom encourages participants to question all aspects of public affairs. Together with party and independent newspapers, the Internet presents alternative voices and views, and fosters grass-roots discussion and debate. The national public sphere is thus expanded, further challenging the dominance of the state in the public domain. Yet, despite its significant and transformative potential, the Internet is still only available to a small fraction of the population. Although there are no legal barriers to Internet access, economic and educational barriers are extremely high, keeping the Internet out of reach for the majority of Egyptian citizens. It is a force in reshaping the media environment and expanding the public sphere, but it is still far from being a popular medium.

Future Directions for Analysis of the Internet

This dissertation has covered the social construction of the Internet in Egypt, illuminating the ways in which the interests and agendas of certain actors have impacted the introduction and development of this new technology in Egyptian society. The dissertation also covered the use of the Internet as a news medium, revealing the specificity of this medium, its contours, its content and format, and the distinctive patterns of use in the Egyptian context. Despite the fact that the Internet is in its infancy in Egypt, I believe that there is great value in analyzing the state of the online news medium at this particular moment in time. As Newhagen (1996) argues, moments of transition allow students of media the opportunity to reconsider the most basic assumptions about old

media, setting the stage for a clearer understanding of the new technology and its regime of content creation (1996, p. 13). Studying the online news medium at this early stage provides insights into how a new medium is formed, how it is institutionalized and incorporated into the media landscape, and how its introduction impacts the established communications system in Egypt. The online news medium may change over time, and these changes will be contingent on the way in which it is institutionalized and integrated in the media landscape.

The recent emergence of the Internet means that very little communications research has been carried out in this area. This dissertation investigates the Internet in the context of Egyptian society at both macro- and micro-analytic levels. I have been more concerned, however, with explaining the social construction processes of the Internet and in describing the online news medium itself. With this in mind, it is clear that a deeper analysis of Internet users in Egypt is an important direction for future research. I have documented some of the interactions of readers with online news sources in Egypt. We now need to move forward and investigate users' interpretations of and engagement with online news sources in order to pinpoint the position of the Internet news medium in their everyday lives. We need to examine the social context of Egyptian users, their online and offline cultural practices, and the complex process of making meaning out of the online news medium's offerings.

Another direction for future research is to further investigate the Internet medium as a public sphere. This would involve analysis of political discussions in different virtual spaces, patterns of online argumentation and processes of public opinion formation in the

virtual spaces. Live chat rooms, newsgroups and online forums discussions can be examined to learn more about the nature of online discussions in each virtual space. The consequences of online political deliberation for individuals, social groups and society as a whole can be explored. Case studies of instances where the Internet has been used to mobilize support around certain issues can be undertaken to build an understanding of the process by which online discussions can begin to gain greater political weight.

Appendix A

Interviews' Questions for Online Journalists at *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd*

Part I: Personal Data

Name (optional):

Age:

Gender:

Occupation:

Publication:

Background in media fields:

      How long have you been in the field?

      What are other media occupations you held throughout your career life?

Background in computer and the Internet:

      How would you rate your computer and Internet literacy (Beginner,

      Moderate, Advanced, Professional)?

      When did you first become aware of the Internet?

Part II: Online Journalists' concepts of Online News

What do you think a news site on the Internet should look like? Are there differences
between an online news site and a newspaper? If yes, please describe these
differences? And why?

What do you think are the major characteristics of online news? Do you think your ideas
about online news differ from those of your bosses and of your colleagues? How?

Should the writing on the Internet be different from writing to newspapers? Should the
photos, art, or headlines? Should the design and presentation? How?

How do you evaluate news sources on the Internet: traditional media web sites, pure
online news sites, news groups, and Internet corporations' news services?

Part III: Online News Production

What are your newspaper motivations for using Internet technology in publishing?

Would you tell me about the early experiments and the development of the paper's website? Who was responsible for the decision of online publishing? And for designing and setting up the website? How the online staff was developed?

Do you feel like you have standards that you follow for what you put on the web site? If so, what are those standards? How have you developed them? How much help in developing the standards have you gotten from your bosses?

Would you describe the process of online news selection? How much freedom you enjoy during these process?

Does the category of news affect your online news selection? Do you try to fill a specific quota for each news category? If yes, please describe?

Do you sometimes feel that you need to consult your superiors regarding news selection? When? And how does this process accomplished?

Would you tell me how you classify the selected news, and how you create the new mix of online news?

Do you participate in daily news meetings? Does this influence your news selection?
Are there differences between your online and print news products in terms of the content of selected news? If yes, please describe these differences? And why?

Do the newspaper reporters contribute special material to the web site? If yes, please give some examples?

How is the newspaper's web site evaluated? Do you get feedback from your superiors, colleagues, or readers?

Who do you think the major audience for your website? Do you ever conceive of a certain type of person that you are trying to reach? What is this person like?

How much e-mail do you get from the readers? How do you handle it? Does this e-mail affect your news selection?

What is your daily routine like?

Appendix B

I. Content Analysis Coding Categories

Source
01. Al-Ahram Newspaper
02. Al-Wafd Newspaper
03. Al-Ahram Site
04. Al-Wafd Site

Publication Date:
01. August 12, 2003
02. August 13, 2003
03. August 14, 2003
04. August 15, 2003
05. August 16, 2003
06. August 17, 2003
07. August 18, 2003

News Sections
01. Front Page
02. Local News
03. Arab News
04. World News
05. Arab & International News
06. Reportage
07. Foreign Correspondents Reports
08. Economy
09. Sports
10. Crime
11. Culture & Arts
12. Woman and Child
13. Al-Ahram Files
14. Opinion
15. Writers
16. Columns
17. Last Page

Story topic:
01. Government/Politics
02. Economy/Business
03. Union/Labor
04. War/Defense/Terrorism
05. Crime
06. Disaster/Accident
07. Sports
08. Education
09. Health
10. Culture/Arts
11. Science/Technology
12. Energy/Environment
13. Religion
14. Human interest
15. Miscellaneous.

Story Focus:
01. Local
02. National
03. Regional
04. International

Story Origin:
01. Staff member
02. National/International news services
03. Outside Writer
04. Multiple origins
05. No Byline

Story Headline:
....

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Story Rhetoric:

....

Story Length (in paragraph):

....

Use of Graphics:

01. Yes

02. No

II. Content Analysis Sampling Frame

The content analysis was conducted by examining *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd* newspapers and web sites for seven consecutive days (August 12-18, 2002). These dates were selected because it was believed that there were no significant scheduled news events that could skew routine coverage practices. Both the print and online news products of each organization were coded on each of the seven days. The analysis included all current-day articles in the sections that appeared in *both* print and online products. Since the editorial content was the main focus of this study, advertising content was omitted; as well as the organization promotional content and community service content (e.g., community guides, tourist information, school transcripts, government/party information, and weather forecasts; weather-related stories that ran in the news sections were counted). In total, 2041 print articles and 1191 online articles were coded according to the above-mentioned categories.

Appendix C

Analysis of Online Text Features

The structural and stylistic features of *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Wafd* online text were analyzed by examining the use of the following:

1. Hyberlinks: "internal" (links that refer to other stories of the site) or "external" (links to other online news sources). The number of hyberlinks, and the type of additional information provided ("current article" or "archived document").
2. Representational formats: words, graphics, audio, video, and animation
3. Interactive spaces: online comment spaces, forums, and chat-rooms. The number and type of reader contributions in interactive spaces. Different types of reader contributions included: "comments," "background information," "new facts," "interpretations" and "multiple forms"
4. Dynamic online text: the dynamic status of the text was scrutinized by checking both news sites at the beginning of the day when online news would be posted and at the end of the day in order to note changes in news texts and the appearance of new articles.

Appendix D

A List of Media Experts Interviewed

Al-Sayed El-Nagar, assistant editor of *Al-Akhbar* newspaper and the managing editor of
its online news site.

Ehab El-Zelaky, editor-in- chief of the *Online* magazine.

Emad Adib, editor-in- chief of *Al-Alam El-Yom* newspaper and the director of the Internet
Portal *good news for me.*

Fahmy Hwadi, Senior Journalist and Writer in *Al-Ahram* newspaper.

Gamal Fahmey, managing editor of *Al-Arabi* newspaper.

Gihan Shaban, assistant editor of the *Saut Al-Omma* newspaper.

Ibrahim Essa, editor-in-chief of *Al-Dostour* newspaper.

Ossama El-Dalil, editor-in-chief of the "purely" online magazine *Al-Morasel.*

Salama A. Salama, managing editor of *Al-Ahram* newspaper and the supervisor of its
online news site.

Talat Romaih, editor-in- chief of *Al-Shaab* newspaper.

Appendix E

Interviews' Questions for Media Experts

When did you first become aware of the Internet? How would you rate your Internet
literacy (Beginner, Moderate, Advanced, Professional)?

How often do you use the Internet?

In which language do you use the Internet?

Where do you access the Internet?

What are your primary uses of the Internet?

How do you evaluate the media in Egypt? What do you think of their news services?

What do you think of the Internet as a news medium in general, and in Egyptian society in particular?

In your opinion, what are the best attributes of the online news medium in general and in Egyptian society in particular?

What do you think the main limitations of the online news medium are in general, and in Egyptian society in particular?

What are the differences between the Internet and the print and broadcast media?

Do you think the Internet has changed the concept of news? Has it changed the process of news production and presentation?

Do you think the Internet has changed the relationship between the writer and the reader? How?

Do you think the Internet allows for a higher degree of reader participation in news production? How?

What do you think Egyptian media's attitude is toward the Internet?

Do you think the online news medium influences the traditional media in Egypt? If so, how?

Can you see any evidence that the availability of the Internet has changed the Egyptian media?

What do you think of censorship on the Internet?

In Egypt now, there is a paradoxical situation since newspapers or articles that the authority censors become quickly available online. How do you interpret this situation? What are its possible effects?

To what extent does this situation represent a challenge to the media system in Egypt? How?

What do you think the government response to this situation will be?

Do you think the Internet as a news medium has, or will have, a special role in Egyptian society? If so, what is that role?

What do you think the future of the online news medium is?

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