

The Political Discourse of Egyptian Blogs:

A Case Study of *Egyptian Awareness*

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In what follows, I examine discussions in the Egyptian political blogosphere in which different common political and social issues are raised and discussed. I seek to discover whether or not political blogging plays a role in creating a virtual public sphere in which participants come together and engage in meaningful deliberation. I do this by examining the nature of the discourses and the quality of citizen's political conversations and active deliberation through a case study of Wael Abbas's well-known blog, *Egyptian Awareness*. More specifically, I examine the use of interactive communication features that bloggers choose to incorporate in their blogs, the blog authors' entries, and their readers' comments. Ultimately, this paper helps to gauge the true impact of Egyptian political blogging for online political debate.

Dans l'article suivant, je m'intéresse aux discussions qui ont lieu dans la blogosphère égyptienne autour de nombreux problèmes politiques et sociaux. Je cherche à découvrir si le *blogging* politique contribue à établir une sphère publique virtuelle qui faciliterait les échanges entre participants en donnant lieu à des débats importants. A partir de l'exemple de l'influent blog de Wael Abbas intitulé *Egyptian awareness*, j'examine la nature du discours et la qualité du débat qui s'établissent entre les citoyens. Plus précisément, j'analyse l'utilisation des outils de communication interactive que les blogueurs choisissent ou non d'intégrer à leurs blogs, ainsi que de nombreux exemples de

posts et de commentaires mis en ligne par les utilisateurs. D'une façon plus générale, il s'agit donc, dans cette étude, d'évaluer l'impact du *blogging* politique égyptien sur la sphère des débats politiques en ligne au sens large.

Prologue

In early January of 2011, our friend and colleague Ali Sayed Mohamed, along with his family, returned to Egypt. Over the course of the preceding long and cold December, Ali had successfully defended his dissertation, *Between the Hammer and the Anvil: Blogs, Bloggers, and the Public Sphere in Egypt*. As the now well-worn story goes, on the 25th of January, 2011, Egyptians, as citizens, protesters, and demonstrators in the broadest sense, led the way towards a new form of democratic awareness, not only for their country but for the mediatized and mediated world as a whole.

From my present vantage point, I recall sitting through Ali's defense and thinking about the distances that separate words from actions. Ali had given a strong presentation of his belief in the significance of specific forms of public language to both reflect and inflect social and political change. He spoke at some length about the histories and contestations around questions of freedom of expression in his native Egypt, and what it meant to engage with and through language in times and spaces of difficult dissent. Egypt, for him, was a different well-worn story, and all the more living and real if not quite yet "revolutionary."

That same recognition of the separation between word and deed came to me again a bit later that same day. A group of friends had gathered at the Wheel Club in Montreal's west end to celebrate Ali's successful defense. A basement room with veneered woods, plastic covered tables, and a large dance

floor given over to square dancing, this was a genuinely odd place for Egyptian political discourse to find its celebratory place. Seated in a not so quiet corner of the bar, Ali and I watched our friends follow the caller's instructions. In time to the music, they traced figure eights, a long S, and other patterns with their changing partners. The caller had a strong, feminine voice, buoyant and keeping to the beat of the music. I was happy in that moment to be keeping Ali company on the sidelines of that dance. We sat in silence and watched the action unfold. He would be forced to do much the same in the weeks to come.

To claim that Ali's dissertation is timely would be both an understatement and somewhat of a falsehood. In discussions over his contribution, he was quick to remind me that on Sunday, the 6th of April, 2008 in Egypt, a widespread call went out for a general strike over corruption, rising prices, stagnant salaries, and an unprecedented gap between the rich and the poor in Egypt. As a result, thousands of demonstrators in the northern industrial town of Mahalla el-Kubra torched the largest textile factory in Egypt, looted shops, and hurled bricks at police, who responded with tear gas. About 150 people were arrested and 80 wounded within the city, and nearly 100 others were arrested elsewhere across Egypt. This tragedy was to become the first demonstration, the first virtual strike ever mobilized and organized by the new media exemplified by Facebook and Egyptian blogs, a virtual strike which became a real strike and demonstration in the streets of Egypt.

It is with that lineage that Ali's work engages. His case study of Wael Abbas's blog, *Egyptian Awareness*, attempts to draw out the limits of the Habermasian public sphere for democratic participation. Like so many good stories, Ali's analysis of *Egyptian Awareness* is not a simple rise and fall

narrative of media activism, but rather a more complex situating of blogs, bloggers and their readers as important social actors in a highly contested, and, as was made so spectacularly evident, highly changeable political environment. If it is to the future of public discourse in Egypt that much work is now turning, Ali's case study offers a pre-history of that nascent movement. By dispelling much of the naïveté surrounding the speed of Egypt's uprisings, this article traces the mediated, activist spaces of dissent that enabled its slow, processural consolidation.

~ Rafico Ruiz

Montreal, May 17, 2011

Introduction

In this paper, guided by the normative criteria of the Habermasian model of the public sphere, I assess the potential impact of weblogs on the Egyptian public sphere. Based on Jurgen Habermas's idea of the ideal public sphere, Baoill identifies a set of criteria to measure the efficacy of weblogs as a medium that supports the creation of a public sphere.¹⁵ He argues that deliberative conversation should be inclusive in which participation is open to all, all participants are considered equal, and any discussion should be based on a rational-critical debate. In the same context and according to the commonly known definitions of the public sphere, some researchers have identified four

¹⁵ A. Baoill, "Into the blogosphere: Weblogs and the public sphere," www.blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/weblogsandthepublicsphere.html (accessed May 23, 2008).

issues associated with online public spaces that include 1) the issue of access to the space (inclusivity), 2) the freedom that individuals have to communicate in that space, 3) the structure of the deliberation based on this access and freedom, and 4) the quality of the discourse produced, which also is related to the preceding variables. According to the ideal theory of the public sphere, this discourse should entail rational-critical discussion or the public use of reason.¹⁶ Drawing on the work of Habermas and other studies regarding the Internet and the public sphere, Lee identifies four requirements: inclusivity, equality, rationality, and autonomy from state and economic power.¹⁷ There is considerable debate over whether the Internet qualifies as a public sphere in the Habermasian sense, but many have argued that the public sphere is still a useful concept to understand and critique online spaces, in particular those enabled and formed by political blogs. The Habermasian concept of the public sphere represents a set of normative ideals to which most actually existing liberal democratic societies aspire but which few, if any, perfectly attain. As Lee has argued, the same is true of the blogosphere, which perhaps strives towards the public sphere that Habermas idealized, but also exhibits both the potentials and limits of the broader public sphere offline.

It is important to touch on the question of access to Internet technologies in Egypt, as well as the concomitant question of who participates in the new forms of communication they enable, especially those who are younger, wealthier, and more educated. An objection could be raised from the outset that the criterion of inclusivity is not fulfilled due to the presence of

¹⁶ See E. Tanner, "Chilean conversations: Internet forum participants debate Augusto Pinochet's detention," in *Journal of Communication*, 51(2), (2001): 383-403.

¹⁷J.K. Lee, "The Blogosphere and the Public Sphere: Exploring possibility of the blogosphere as a public sphere," Annual Conference of the International Communication Association, June 19-23, 2006, Dresden, Germany.

economic and educational barriers, and also due to the fact that the total number of Internet users and those who have direct or indirect experience with the Internet in Egypt is still only about 17 percent of the total population. Notwithstanding the availability of public utilities that provide Internet access and the large growth of Internet users annually, the potential for exclusion is evident as large numbers of Egyptians still cannot take advantage of Internet use. Nevertheless, the potential of the Internet and blogging should not be devalued in terms of inclusivity: the Internet has been integrated into the landscape of Egypt's forms of mass communication and has become essential to its social infrastructure, and blogging has become recognized as an important part of the media ecology. The problem of Internet access no longer constitutes a barrier to blogging in Egypt, as I have learnt through numerous interviews with Egyptian bloggers and human rights activists. The blogosphere enhances inclusivity because of its low barriers to entry relative to traditional, established mass media. Any individual with access to the Internet can easily and at no cost establish a blog, even if he or she has not had previous experience with blogging technology. This suggests that blogs are inclined towards equality, since people are now able to participate in blogging regardless of their socio-economic status. Since the cost of blogging is almost negligible, Egyptian bloggers represent all classes, not just the highly educated or the wealthy. Even if Egyptian blogging started with bloggers from the middle class and the highly educated and culturally-aware, over time, people from different socio-economic levels have begun to blog or to read and post their own comments. As Keren puts it: "The blogosphere [...] has broken some of the monopolies that constrained the

public sphere in the past. It has overcome the hegemonic voice of the rich and powerful and allowed anybody with access to the Internet to have a voice.”¹⁸

The effect of blogs is not only limited to the people who have access to the Internet. The stories about issues that have been raised and published on blogs have reached beyond the boundaries of the Internet; even those people who do not have access to these Internet blog stories are aware of them through those who have access or from independent and oppositional media outlets. Contrary to what is commonly assumed concerning the lack of women bloggers, Herring, Kouper, et al. found that the number of males (52%) and females (48%), and the number of adults and teens are roughly equal, which indicates a close gender balance.¹⁹ In Egypt, many bloggers are women who write about their life experiences on their own blogs, sometimes as political activist bloggers and sometimes as personal bloggers.

The public sphere model requires that public spaces exist in which people are free to communicate, and which are autonomous from state and economic power. Despite a few government crackdowns on some bloggers in Egypt, blogs and the Internet are not subject to direct, highly-invasive censorship or blocking. Most of the blogosphere is visible inside Egypt, and given the restrictions on the traditional news media environment in Egypt, blogs may represent the most open public communication platform for political discourse in the country, even taking into account the existence of independent and oppositional traditional media outlets. The blogosphere and other forms of

¹⁸ M. Keren, *Blogosphere: The New Political Arena* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 16.

¹⁹ S. C. Herring, I. Kouper, L.A. Scheidt and E.L. Wright, E. L., “Women and Children Last: The Discursive Construction of Weblogs,” www.blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/womenandchildren.html (accessed December 14, 2005).

communication available on the Internet have been by far more resistant to state control than the traditional media.

In terms of rationality or rational-critical discourse, which is a fundamental requirement for the ideal form of the public sphere, it could be argued that blogs exhibit several features that facilitate and enhance this sort of discourse. Through postings and hyperlinks, users are able to construct meaning by expressing and exchanging their ideas, and by searching for relevant knowledge through the entire network of the blogosphere.²⁰ However, for proper, rational conversation to occur, reason-giving must be present—logical relationships must exist between opinions that are supported by arguments, and which employ evidence and citations. In his study of Howard Dean's candidate blog, Meraz called a post "reason-giving" "if it cited substantive reasons for its opinion as opposed to nonfact-based, purely emotional reasoning"; moreover, he conceptualizes *emotional reasoning* as that which is "based on personal, selfish reasons or simple affective statements."²¹

In what follows, I examine discussions in the Egyptian political blogosphere in which different common political and social issues are raised and discussed. I seek to discover whether or not political blogging plays a role in creating a virtual public sphere in which participants come together and engage in meaningful deliberation. I do this by specifically examining the nature of the discourse and the quality of citizen political conversation and active deliberation. More specifically, I examine the use of interactive communication features that bloggers choose to incorporate in their blogs, the

²⁰ See Lee, "The Blogosphere and the Public Sphere."

²¹ S. Meraz, "Analyzing Political Conversation on the Howard Dean Candidate Blog," in *Blogging, Citizenship, and the Future of Media* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 59-81.

blog authors' entries, and their readers' comments. Thus, this paper helps to gauge the true impact of Egyptian political blogging for online political debate. It concludes with a suggestion about how to conceptualize this impact in an alternative way. Thus, even if the Egyptian blogosphere might fail to fulfill the Habermasian ideal of the public sphere on several counts, these blogs nevertheless leave a mark on the political landscape as forms of activist media.

A New Platform of Expression

The Egyptian blogosphere is indeed a large discussion space that features a rich and varied mix of bloggers. Among them are those affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, those dedicated to feminist issues, and numerous personal blogs in which people share their experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Since it is quite impossible to present a comprehensive statistical analysis of Egyptian blogging activity concerned with public issues in Egypt, a case study of a single blog seems the most reasonable means of providing precise, yet tentative conclusions about the nature of contemporary trends in the Egyptian blogosphere. Thus, I restrict my examination to a case study of *Al-Wa'i al-Masry* (*Egyptian Awareness*), the blog of the renowned Egyptian blogger and activist Wael Abbas, who is considered to be the most popular blogger in Egypt and who has garnered national and international publicity in the traditional and Internet media for the effectiveness of his blog (see <http://misrdigital.blogspirit.com/>).²² *Egyptian Awareness* deals with politics and current affairs and is often cited by the traditional media in Egypt or the

²² Henceforth, all citations that refer to *Al-Wa'i al-Masri* at <http://misrdigital.blogspirit.com/> are cited only by their date of post.

international media; moreover, its creator is often hosted by mainstream media, both nationally and internationally.

Wael Abbas is a freelance journalist, blogger, and human rights activist who has earned many awards including the following: the Egyptian Against Corruption Award 2005/2006, the journalism award by the International Center for Journalists in 2007, and Human Rights Watch's Hellman/Hammett Award in 2008. In 2006, the BBC considered him one of the most influential people in the Arab world, and CNN recognized him as the Middle East Person of the year in 2007. In 2010, he was also chosen by *Arabian Business*—in their annual listing of the world's most influential Arabs—as one of the most influential Arabs in the world. Thus, I have chosen *Egyptian Awareness* as my case study for the following seven reasons:

- (1) Wael Abbas's blog is arguably the most well-known Egyptian blog in the Middle East and in the West, and is highly influential in the Arabic-speaking world. The Aljazeera English channel described him as "... a thorn inside the Mubarak government in Cairo and its security forces through his blog 'misrdigital' or 'Egyptian Awareness.' Abbas is as influential as any political blogger anywhere" (embedded video, post of October 11, 2009).
- (2) *Egyptian Awareness* is continuously updated and visited by thousands or millions of readers daily/weekly.
- (3) *Egyptian Awareness* is considered by traditional news organs as a reliable source of information and opinion.
- (4) Unlike the great number of blogs that depend on the mainstream media to provide content, Wael Abbas has his own sources, and produces original work when covering the issues that he is

concerned about. He reports first-hand on these issues rather than relying on reports from traditional journalism.

- (5) Due to its popularity, Abbas's blog must be considered a trend-setter; that is, other Arabic bloggers model their blog-structure and discourse on *Egyptian Awareness*.
- (6) Through its variety and intensity of coverage of the public debate in Egypt and elsewhere, Abbas' blog is a blogging hub to which thousands of other blogs link.
- (7) In 2008, *Egyptian Awareness* included 253 videos and 2977 permanent subscribers on its YouTube channel; and the total number of viewers of his videos on YouTube reached 19,845,331 (post of November 19, 2008)

I choose three years (2007, 2008, and 2009) as the period for my analysis, since this was a period full of transformative events and a political mobility that included more demonstrations and protests on the Egyptian street than ever before, including the April 6th movement and much more.

The Appearance of *Egyptian Awareness*

I will begin by describing the general appearance and layout of *Egyptian Awareness*, which is hosted by Blogspot.com. The blog's appearance is simple (see Fig 1). The blog layout is divided into three columns: the largest middle column is reserved for the main content—the posts—and the two narrower columns are for links to other blogs that Abbas reads, links to the previous months' and years' archived posts, the identity of the blogger, links within the blog, and ads. A somewhat ambiguous anti-government image of a police barricade is placed at the head of the page. Below the header image is the title

of the blog *Al-Wa'i al-Masri*, beneath which is the subtitle “Writes of his [Abbas’s] own will, without working for anybody else.” Readers encounter Abbas’s name in English as “Blogger-in-chief” and in Arabic as “Editor-in-chief (*ra’is al-tahrir*).” Abbas’s posts appear in the middle column. His blog contains banner ads that straddle either side of the main column with a Twitter feed on the right side bar. On the left side bar are a list of awards that his blog has won accompanied by the logos of the awarding organizations. A skull and crossbones graphic placed on the top of the left side bar reads: “This blog may contain language that you find offensive.” He also has a political graphic in the right side bar.

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الوعي المصري

مدونة الوعي المصري - على مزاج صاحبيها اللي مش بيشتغل عند حد

عاجل - | HomePage | إشتام إعلامي عالي بغضبة كروت الإنترنت التي كشفناها »
« حريق مدمر في مجلس الشورى المصري »

Wednesday, 13 August 2008

هل يعلق العادلي على المدونات كما علق نظيف

هل يعلق العادلي على المدونات كما علق نظيف

في هوجة تعليق أحمد نظيف أو من يتظاهر بأنه أحمد نظيف على المدونات وإشارته بها هل يعلق حبيب العادلي أيضا على المدونات

والسقيقة أن تعليق العادلي مطلوب ردا على كثير من التساؤلات وعلامات الإستفهام مثل لماذا لم يكشف النقاب عن الغالبية العظمى من ضباط وأمناء الشرطة الذين يلهمون بوضوح وبملابسهم الرسمية في أكثر من دسنة من الغديوهات التي نشرناها على الوعي المصري ولم يدان إلا ثلاثة فقط من أفراد الشرطة لثان في بولاق الدكرور وواحد فقط في إمبابة وصاحبت هذه الادانة الضخمة وحجسه أيضا

فقد حبس عماد الكبير ثلاثة اشهر بتهمة مقاومة السلطات وحبس شخصية كليب القفا في إمبابة بتهمة السرقة عقابا لهما على التبايع عما وقع ضداهم من تعذيب ولما تم حفظ التحقيق في كليب الشخص الذي يجبر فتاة على خلع ملابسها

رئيس التحرير

وائل عباس

CAUTION

تحذير
هذه المدونة
قد تحتوي
كلام ما يهيجك

WINNER OF

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

Hellman
Award
2008

Knight International Journalism Award

2007

CNN

Middle East
Person of the
Year
2007

BBC

Most Influential
Person
2006

Business.com

Most Influential
Arabs
2010

جائزة مواقع ضد الفساد
2005/2006

NOMINEE

TUE TUE

Misr Digit@l

An Independent Egyptian Blog
Blogger in Chief
Wael Abbas

destinia.com

حجز فنادق
بأفضل الأسعار
120 ألف فندق في العالم

تذكر طيران
إحجز تذكرتك الآن
في أربع خطوات
جميع شركات الطيران

NO Illegal Confiscation
Personal Devices

Fig 1: Screenshot of Wael Abbas's blog post of August 13, 2008.

The language of *Egyptian Awareness* is informal, meaning that it does not use the formal modern standard Arabic; rather, Abbas's posts and his readers' comments are almost entirely written in informal Egyptian slang, which is more or less identical to the Cairean Arabic dialect. Abbas's posts and comments reflect the demographic bias of his audience: the dialect of Egyptian used by Abbas and those who post their comments on his blog is primarily a youthful dialect of Egyptian Arabic that uses slang, which is not characteristic of the elder generation of Egyptians.

An analysis of the manner in which readers post their written comments reveals an audience whose forms of communication are bound tightly to digital media, such as the Internet, and perhaps even more commonly, cell phone text messaging (SMS). In some sense then, we could talk about how Arabic blog discourse and blog comments constitute a particular mix of genres, discourses, and styles in the context of the linguistic structure of the text.²³ For example, many readers use a Latin script to informally transliterate messages in Arabic. Although users do not follow any systematic transliteration scheme, phonetic spelling is common. Another technique that Abbas and his readers commonly use is a form of symbolization in which sounds that have no written equivalent in the Latin script are symbolized using Arabic numerals that resemble the corresponding letter in the Arabic script. Bloggers are quite creative in using these kinds of shortcuts. For example, the Arabic numeral 3 is commonly used for the Arabic letter "ع ('ayn)," and 7 symbolizes the Arabic letter "ح (ha)" because their shapes closely resemble the corresponding Arabic letters.

²³ N. Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 67.

The linguistic structure of *Al-Wa'i al-Masri* shares the general structure of computer-mediated language, which is perceived as “less correct, complex, and coherent than standard written language.”²⁴ Since *Al-Wa'i al-Masri* is a blog and therefore constitutes a type of “computer-mediated discourse,” its language, both in Abbas’ posts and his readers’ comments, naturally lends itself to the use of an informal Egyptian spoken vernacular Arabic rather than its formal Modern Standard written counterpart.

Al-Wa'i al-Masri is a journalistic-style blog featuring news and commentary, which avoids any discourse that can be characterized as personal. It focuses on politics and current affairs, and depends to a great extent on the information sources provided by its audience; its readers send their real stories to Abbas, along with videos and photographs usually taken with their mobile phone cameras. In this vein, *Al-Wa'i al-Masri* could be classified in some sense as a kind of citizen journalism that provides an opportunity for the voices and thoughts of ordinary citizens to be heard by a public audience that at times numbers in the millions.²⁵ Usually in his posts, Abbas mentions his sources by saying “this video arrived to me from an individual” without mentioning the name of the person.

In general, the climate and tone of discourse in the blog can be characterized as denunciatory; in other words, the blog denounces and expresses a critique in a derogatory way about the police, the corruption of public officials, the political system, and the regime. Abbas expresses his intense contempt for even the mainstream or state-run media that is intended to engender a certain scepticism about their content. His blog has been

²⁴ Herring, et al, “Women and Children Last,” n.p.

²⁵ K. Erjavec and M. Kovacic, “A Discursive Approach to Genre: Mobi News,” in *European Journal of Communication*, 24 (2), (2009): 147-164.

consistently associated with controversies involving violence, torture, police brutality, corruption, forgery, bribery, sexual harassment, and so on.

Textual Analysis of *Egyptian Awareness*

In this section, I work through textual analysis to examine the discourse of *Egyptian Awareness*. As Mitra and Cohen explain, an analysis of text on the World Wide Web (WWW) not only examines the written word but also includes an analysis of its accompanying multimedia images, an analysis that considers both the content and implications of the text and also how the text is visually or graphically produced.²⁶ They also emphasize that critical textual analysis focuses not only on the content of the text but also on the way in which the content is presented and the significance of this presentation: “The objective of critical textual analysis is to move beyond an analysis of the volume of text and its content to the level of understanding the affectivity of the text and what it says of the community of people who produce and consume the texts.”²⁷ Mitra and Cohen also identify three factors that critical textual analysis considers: the formal aspects of the text and its signifying strategies (semiotic analysis and structural analysis); the way in which a single text is connected with other similar texts (intertextuality); and the role of the various readers of the text who, through their reading, make the text meaningful.²⁸ Researchers also study various types of discourse on the Web by using the concept of genre as a lens for analysis.

²⁶ A. Mitra and E. Cohen, “Analyzing the Web: Directions and Challenges,” in *Doing Internet Research: Critical Issues and Methods for Examining the Net* (Thousand Oaks, London and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1999), 181.

²⁷ Ibid, 181.

²⁸ Ibid, 181-182.

A discourse analysis of the *Al-Wa'i al-Masri* blog may yield insight into the process of social change in Egyptian society, as well as into the construction of identity in relation to the bloggers and their readers. Candlin argues that since discourse is more than spoken or written language, discourse analysis must understand the social context and the situation in which the discourse appears and occurs. Discourse analysis perceives language as “a process which is socially situated.”²⁹ In this context, an analysis of the discourse of *Al-Wa'i al-Masri* is helpful for understanding the discursive construction of blogs in Egypt, and to what extent, blogging in Egypt can create spaces for dialogues about democracy, a new public sphere in which political and social issues can be discussed outside of the established traditional media.

My analysis is guided by the following questions:

- What are the major themes that the *Al-Wa'i al-Masri* blog discusses?
- How does Abbas utilize technological and stylistic features in his blogging?
- By examining the kind and form of argumentation that the blog uses, what is the quality of the discussions? What kind of vocabulary and style are used in these discussions?
- What discourse orientations does Abbas use to deal with the issues discussed in his blog? When attempting to explain the relationship of these discourses to the political and social

²⁹ C.N. Candlin, “General Editor’s Preface,” in *The Construction of Professional Discourse* (London and New York: Longman, 1997), viii.

reality that they reflect, what are the significance of these orientations?

- What information sources does *Al-Wa'i al-Masri* use to present public issues, and what is the significance of the nature of these sources?
- What kind of hyperlinks (internal or external), pictures, photographs, caricatures, and so on does Abbas use in his blog, and what is their significance to the discourse of the blog?
- What is the nature and significance of the discussions that occur between readers as is reflected by their comments on the posts?
- What are the main actors that *Al-Wa'i al-Masri* includes in its discourse, and how does Abbas present their roles and symptoms to shape his position towards them?

My study uses a combination of content and textual analysis to examine the preceding questions. The first step in this discourse analysis is to identify the themes, topics, and sub-topics covered in the blog genre and the linguistic choices that Abbas makes. Abbas's blog is organized by posts that are time stamped, dated, titled, and separated by a blank space. Usually, Abbas makes one post on one topic per day, but sometimes, he makes multiple posts per day, which take the form of brief articles or journal entries. Typically, most of his posts are distinguished by a headline, followed by a video or photograph or illustrations relating to the topic entry. Each post has an option for his readers to write comments, which can be accessed through a link. Unlike the majority of blogs that depend on the mainstream media to provide content for their

commentary about issues in the news,³⁰ the *Al-Wa'i al-Masri* blog has its own sources and produces original work when covering current events. Abbas films his own video clips and provides them as embedded video or hyperlinks to his YouTube account. Abbas also includes on-the-scene footage captured with his own camera. He also clearly states the source of the videos or photos he posts on his blog, describing whether the video or the photos are taken by him or another source. In the five years that he has been writing his blog, Abbas has generated a large archive of articles, which he can use to provide self-referential hyperlinks, and create a continuous context for his posts. This archive also benefits the readers who can view the historical context of the newer posts. For example, one of the most important advantages of the blog and its archived material is that readers can go back and forth in time, and comment on previous posts that Abbas has posted several years earlier.

Topics of the Blog Entries

Table 1 shows the kind of issues that *Al-Wa'i al-Masri* has dealt with over three consecutive years (2007, 2008, 2009) and the number of posts and the number of comments that Abbas's posts have generated. A topical analysis of the blog posts indicates that the *Al-Wa'i al-Masri* blog has followed current events very closely. Sometimes, Abbas's posts provide simple briefings on a particular topic or topics, but more often, they reflect Abbas's personal evaluation and criticism of the play of events and their major protagonists.

³⁰ G. Lanosga, "Blogs and Big Media: A Comparative Study of Agendas," Annual Conference of the International Communication Association. May 22-26, 2006, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

Table 1: Topics of the blog entries.

Post Topics	Number of Posts					
	2007 (80 posts)		2008 (100)		2009 (35)	
	No. of posts	No. of comments	No. of posts	No. of comments	No. of posts	No. of comments
Corruption and the inefficiency of the bureaucracy	1	27	10	209	2	49
Demonstrations and strikes and the authority's response			8	258	0	0
Elections	4	215				
Instability of the regime	2	91	5	148	2	128
Criticism of governmental policies and officials	1	51	2	50	2	44
Political controversies about previous regimes	3	196	3	98	2	63
Politics totals	11	580	28	763	8	284
The abuse of power (persecution and incarceration, torture and police brutality)	16	887	7	125	6	228

THE POLITICAL DISCOURSE OF EGYPTIAN BLOGS

Street violence and thuggery			5	337	1	23
Civil rights totals	16	887	12	462	7	251
Crackdown on bloggers and Internet activists	3	186	11	224	7	256
Freedom of expression on the blogosphere	6	287	6	153	3	68
Bloggers' activities, discussion about blogging, and reports on speaking engagements in other media	28	10 22	10	210	5	216
Criticism of the mainstream media	6	242	4	106	1	19
Freedom of expression totals	43	1737	31	693	16	559
Palestine, Gaza events; and Hamas	1	17	6	274	0	0
Egyptian-Arabic relations and their impact on Egyptians			3	256	1	47
International news and	2	75	9	181	2	27

events						
Foreign affairs totals	3	92	18	711	3	74
Poverty in Egypt			2	64	0	0
Workers' issues and their demands	1	20	-	-	0	0
Economic issues totals	1	20	2	64	0	0
Sexual harassment			1	15		
Religious extremism	2	64	2	104	0	0
Social issues totals	2	0	3	119	0	0
Arts, literature, and cinema	1	42	5	121	1	40
Dairies and personal reflections	3	95	1	11	0	0
Literary topics totals	4	137	6	132	1	40

Table 1 shows the seven major themes that *Al-Wa'i al-Masri* raises and discusses, which range from politics and public affairs, and the civil rights of citizens to the debate over freedom of speech both in the traditional and new media. Abbas's interests also extend to international affairs that affect Egyptian internal conditions and the conditions of Egyptians abroad. The endless controversies between Palestine, Israel, Hamas, and the rest of the Arab world, and particularly Egypt's role in this controversy, are all prominent subjects of discussion. Admittedly, the categorization of each post under a single topic cannot be free of some arbitrariness. By its very nature, blog discourse is dynamic and organic and cannot be expected to be held to strict and somewhat arbitrary categorizations, which might suggest that one

post belongs exclusively to one topic and not another. Nevertheless, as readers, it is still possible and moreover meaningful to identify themes to which each post belongs. I have followed this strategy by relying on the most important features of every post, and then I created sub-categories to provide a more precise picture for my readers.

Before delving into a detailed description of each of the themes, I will describe the nature of the blog entries in a general way. The topics “Freedom of expression,” “Politics and public affairs,” and “Civil rights” are the three most discussed major topics on Abbas’s blog, receiving over a three year period, 90, 47, and 35 posts respectively. These topics include corruption; bureaucratic inefficiency; elections; new activist movements; and police brutality toward voters, activists, and ordinary citizens. All these phenomena attract severe and unqualified condemnation by Abbas and his readers. Whenever possible, Abbas concentrates his criticism on the areas of corruption and bureaucratic negligence, focusing his attention simultaneously on some of the most momentous events in Egypt’s modern history while also shifting his gaze to comment about the mundane, the everyday. For example, through video posts and live reports on his blog, Abbas gives particular attention in his coverage to the devastating fire at the Shura Council building, which is considered a historical landmark in Cairo. He accuses the government of negligence and inefficiency, as he writes: “At the time of writing these lines, the devastating fire is still raging in the building. It started more than three hours ago. Yet, nobody has made any effort to control it” (post of August 19, 2008). In a related incident, he also posted a video of the fire at the National Theatre that he received in an email from an anonymous reader (post of September 27, 2008). As for the mundane, Abbas complains about the presence of traffic police in inappropriate places, such as ramps, which he

claims is responsible for a number of car accidents (post of September 5, 2008). He blames these incidents and their damages to property on the corruption of traffic policemen. Abbas enhances his written posts with pictures and videos sent by his readers, which serve to reinforce the outrage toward scandals, inefficiency, and corruption within the bureaucracy (post of July 7, 2008).

The topics also include self-reflective comments in which Abbas and other bloggers describe their activities, such as when they give a lecture, attend a conference, participate in television programs, or publish their writings and commentary in newspapers. In addition, statements of solidarity with other bloggers and announcements of awards received also fall under the category of “Freedom of expression.” Generally, with respect to the 90 posts about freedom of expression, nearly half (43) are devoted to discussing the activities listed above. One of the widely recognized threats to freedom of speech over the Internet is the effort of security authorities to censor blogs and to shut down websites. Abbas claims these crackdowns involve collaboration between the authorities in Egypt and multi-national corporations such as Google, YouTube, and Yahoo! in an attempt to disable Internet activists and bloggers from posting certain material online.³¹ Content that the authorities deem to be problematic is identified through techniques of flagging or reporting. While Abbas’s claims seem a bit far-fetched, he cites his own blogging experiences as an example of intrusions by corporate entities. He cites as support for his claims the fact that Yahoo! suspended his email account and YouTube removed some videos from his account (posts of April 23, 2009; November 17, 2008; January 19, 2008; November 29 and 22, 2007).

³¹ Abbas made this claim during a panel discussion called “New Media vs Repressive Regimes: Democratic Development and the Freedom of Expression,” which was part of the Cross-Canada Dialogue Series sponsored by Rights & Democracy, Ottawa, Canada on October 7, 2009.

Another example that Abbas cites is the fact that the administration authorities at Facebook interfered by removing the online campaign solidarity group called “Free-Adel,” claiming that the representations on their webpage were threatening and obscene (post of April, 23, 2009). The Free-Adel solidarity campaign, which attracted media coverage from around the world, involved a group of Egyptian bloggers who launched an online campaign in solidarity with their detained colleague blogger Mohamed Adel by Egyptian authorities. This blogger was arrested by the Egyptian government because he went to Gaza and met representatives from Hamas. Generally, Egyptian bloggers use creative ways to protest. For example, they posted photos of themselves posing with fake machine guns, as a reference to the government’s accusation that Mohamed Adel was engaged in terrorist activities. Usually, Egyptian bloggers create solidarity groups to support each other when one of them faces trial or detainment. Further, these groups also reach out to international human rights organizations for support.

Often, blogging posts present evidence to prove that the Egyptian authorities are openly hostile toward bloggers. These posts are intended to educate readers about the challenges that bloggers and Internet activists face, especially the attempts by government authorities to disrupt their work. For example, Abbas talks about how security agencies violate the privacy of Internet users. In one post, he explains the new conditions for using the wireless Internet network (WiFi): in addition to paying fees, users of WiFi are required to provide their names, phone numbers, and email addresses to which a password and user name is sent (post of June 9, 2008).

Another sub-category included under the major theme of “Freedom of expression” is the criticism of the mainstream media. It has been common for bloggers working as media critics— criticizing the performance of the

mainstream media whether it be press journalism or the satellite broadcasting channels—to have occupied a significant space on Abbas’s blog (11posts). These posts condemn this performance from the vantage point of different ideological and political affiliations. At the same time, the discourses in these posts attempt to highlight the courage of bloggers who address the unspoken topics and issues ignored by the traditional media that is not doing its job because of self-censorship and many other restrictions. Many Egyptian bloggers claim that they are covering stories that the traditional media does not dare to cover, and that they represent an alternative media for the public. For example, bloggers covered an event in which Egyptian army cadets attacked a police station with stones in a town south of Cairo. At the time, traditional newspapers were forbidden to report the incident due to a law banning the publication of any information regarding the Egyptian army (post of March, 14, 2009).

Many accusations are directed at different mainstream media as to how they repurpose information and material such as photos, videos, and ideas from blogs, but without acknowledging their original source and the bloggers who produced the content. For example, in one post, Abbas accused the Aljazeera channel of stealing one of his videos, which the network used in a promotional video about democracy (post of January, 20, 2009). In another post, he criticizes the *Elfagr* newspaper for releasing a news story accompanied by a photograph stolen from a blog (post of November 29, 2008). Apart from complaints about the mainstream media violating the intellectual property rights of bloggers, Abbas’s posts emulate the strategies employed by other bloggers in questioning and judging the objectivity and accuracy of mainstream news reports (post of June 7, 2009). For example, these criticisms evaluate the performance of some of the Egyptian satellite television channels

(post of December 25, 2007; September 1 and 4, 2007) and question whether the mainstream media in general covers issues in ways that are free of contradictions (post of September 4, 2008). In another case, bloggers questioned the credibility of a news story published in mainstream media by posting testimonies of eye-witnesses to the events that were reported incorrectly by journalists (post December 16, 2008).

Sometimes the condemnation of the mainstream media comes from readers' comments. For example, a reader named "Hossam Amer" writes:

I followed your blog [Wael's blog] two years ago. Your work as an independent journalist is more important than the coverage by state-controlled newspapers. God help you in fulfilling your mission. What you have done has had positive impacts in exposing the corruption and corrupt people (post of May 26, 2009).

Here Hossam Amer makes a comparison between the discourse of blogs as independent media and the state-run media in which he indicates that blogging is more authentic and trustworthy than traditional journalists in the state mainstream media. In another example, a reader criticizes the *Alyoum Alsabea* newspaper for taking credit for being the first to cover a story about a citizen being tortured in a police station: "The truth is that you convey material and steal the efforts of bloggers." Then the reader's further commentary reiterates how bloggers are courageous, reliable, and trustworthy for having discovered the truth, implying that traditional journalists avoid placing themselves at risk. The post also emphasizes the autonomy of bloggers in Egypt, and stresses how they do not get paid for exposing themselves to the risks and threats they receive from the authorities (post of February 8, 2009).

In general, the coverage of demonstrations, protests, strikes, and the official response by the government authorities has occupied an important

place in blogging in Egypt since 2005. At this time, activist groups such as the Kefaya Movement openly demonstrated against President Mubarak, and bloggers played an important role in mobilizing and covering their rallies, photographing and posting information about the activist events on their blogs. Abbas's *Al-Wa'i al-Masri* blog has been the central pioneer in this process. This is particularly true for those years chosen as a research period in this present study. As expected, the posts on *Al-Wa'i al-Masri* reflect this general trend with eight posts addressing this theme. Additionally, four posts present extensive coverage of the elections and referenda—such as the parliamentary and Shura councils elections—along with their concomitant protests and violence (post of June 13, 2007), the precedential elections, and the referendum of constitutional amendments in 2005 and 2007 (post of March 22 and 29, 2007). Although some of the elections occurred before the three year period that this study examines, they still are present within the context of other posts made during this study period.

A famous example of blog coverage of demonstrations, strikes, and the Egyptian regime's response are the posts related to the Mahalla events (also known as the April 6th strike) for which Abbas provided excellent coverage as the events transpired. The language he used in his blog imitated that used in television news broadcasts. For example, in his coverage, he used expressions like "live news coverage of the strike as it unfolds" (post April 6, 2008) and "more news on the strike will follow" (post of April 8, 2008). From the beginning of the strike and the events that followed, Abbas posted seven posts in seven consecutive days. In these posts, Abbas's coverage was superior to the coverage provided by traditional media, as he delivered live coverage of the events from the street using a Twitter feed and mobile phone video. Embedded documentary video made by Abbas himself (duration 8 minutes)

and videos sent by anonymous users covered the Mahalla events on-site, and also included interviews with the families of detainees and families of people killed during the riots. This coverage also was enhanced by external links to feature articles about the events in the international media to which Abbas himself contributed. Lastly, links to other blogs covering the Mahalla riots also were provided on Abbas's blog.

The response of government authorities, such as the police and internal security forces, and "news agents" to the Mahalla events was negatively and highly criticized on Abbas's blog. Abbas not only documents incidents of police brutality, but as his posts insinuate, police forces were responsible for sparking the Mahalla events in the first place. Comments and posts by readers added follow-up coverage of the events and gave additional details from people who participated in the riots. Despite the quality of Abbas's coverage of the events of April 6th and his desire to *appear* as an impartial professional news reporter, the tenor of his discourse belies this. Similar to the general tone of the blog, the coverage of these events is consistently accompanied by vitriolic and extremely obscene outpourings of anger about the decline of conditions in Egypt, corruption, poverty, regime instability, and almost anything and everything Egyptian.

Table 1 indicates that Abbas's blog is also concerned with covering human rights violations in Egypt by exposing incidents of torture and the abuse of suspects who are political activists and ordinary Egyptian citizens. Specifically, Abbas's blog denounces acts of torture and ill-treatment by Egyptian authorities in various detention centers. On *Al-Wa'i al-Masri* and his YouTube site, he provides his readers with numerous scandalous videos of police officials involved in brutal acts of torture, videos received from anonymous sources and in some cases shot by the police themselves, depicting

the torture of suspects in police stations. The most notorious example of these videos is the documentary footage of the Imad Al Kabeer incident, a minibus driver who was arrested when he intervened in a dispute between a police officer and another driver. After Abbas posted the video of his torture by the police on his blog, public discussion about police brutality sparked. Abbas's blog has been characterized as an anti-torture blog, since he has posted many videos revealing such cases of torture. For example, another torture video, which Abbas says he received in an anonymous e-mail, shows a man slapping a woman and forcing her to remove her clothes. Distancing himself from making too strong of a claim, Abbas notes that the anonymous e-mailer alleges that the assailant is a policeman (post of December 20, 2007). Abbas also posted a picture of a detainee cell sent to him under the title "A new scandal from the cells of police stations," which shows the poor conditions of the cells where people are detained in an inhumane way (post of October 13, 2008). Abbas also has interviewed Ahmed Maher, another prominent Internet activist in Egypt and the founder of the April 6th Movement.³² In addition, he posted many photos that display a number of Maher's tortured body organs, and Maher's narration of how he was arrested in his car on the street and how he was tortured by police in the police station to force him to reveal the Facebook password of the April 6th Movement (posts of May 9 and 19, 2008).

The benefits of Abbas's blog and others like it are the light that they shed on behind-closed-doors instances of police abuse and brutality, and how they enable citizens to prompt official investigations in which bloggers and their readers are active participants in the follow-up investigations. In these cases,

³² A Facebook-based group of mostly young Egyptians that called for Egyptians to strike on April 6, 2008 to protest rising prices and poverty. They succeeded to mobilize 77,000 protesters for the April 6 strike. It has received wide attention for its lively political debate and helped mobilize many protests that have swept Egypt over the last few years, and that ended with the January 25 Revolution.

videos and photographs archived on blogs serve as real sources of evidence for official investigators. Thus, blogs can function as a “knowledge repository.”³³ These kind of blogs also play an informative role in that they act as organs for informing citizens of their rights. Blogs also make their presence felt in the traditional media—whether independent, private, or national—by bringing to light uncommon issues that the traditional media miss but eventually are obliged to cover as a result of blog coverage. In this way, blogs have an important if indirect role in setting the agenda for the traditional media. Thus, it seems that a new public sphere is emerging in which public events never covered by the traditional media are now given prominent and very public exposure through blogs. Blogs like Abbas’s not only serve as a way for Egyptian citizens to demand accountability from their government with respect to the public exposure of abuse by authorities, but also actively document police discipline and brutality with videos, pictures, and eyewitness accounts. For example, in a post sarcastically entitled “Will Al-Adly [the Egyptian minister of the interior] comment on blogs like Nazif [the Egyptian prime minister] has,” Abbas lists most of the torture videos already available on his blog, and concludes with the following accusation:

The comment of Habib Aladly [the Egyptian minister of the interior] is required on many questions, such as, why has he not revealed the identities of the police officers and informants who appeared in their formal uniform in more than twelve videos filmed in police stations that we published on the *Al-Wa’i al-Masri*? Only three of the implicated police officials have been arrested and indicted. [...] Why has the investigation [into the case of] the clip in which somebody forced a girl to take off her clothes ceased? [...] Why does the ministry of interior threaten those who appear in torture clips? [Mr. Adly’s] comments are required [to explain] the absence of protection from harassment for women in the streets, especially during festivals. [...] Commentary is also required on the relationship between the

³³ Lee, “The Blogosphere and the Public Sphere,” n.p.

police and citizenry; on the question of why citizens are not afraid of the burglar but *are* afraid of the policeman. [Mr. Adly's] Commentary is required [to explain the occurrence of] kidnapping and the torture of Internet activists [...] and police intervention [to] fix elections... (post of August 13, 2008).

The blogger here tries to remind his readers about human rights violations that were publicized on the blog, while insisting that the minister be held to account for allowing security forces to torture detainees.

Street violence and intimidation has escalated in Egypt under conditions of economic disadvantage and the corruption of public authority, especially in the slum areas of major cities. Along with concerns about the violation of the civil rights of citizens, personal security on the street has emerged as a topic of concern for Egyptian bloggers. This issue of street violence and thuggery occupies many discussions on the public space of *Al-Wa'i al-Masri* through readers' comments and Abbas's posts, which usually are accompanied by video clips displaying violence in the streets. Usually, these videos are submitted by the audience. Abbas welcomes these clips and openly acknowledges their contribution to the success of the blog as a form of citizen-journalism. For example, when Abbas introduces the topic of street violence, he proudly thanks his readers:

The issue of this week is the product of your work. Yes, your work, not mine! And all these published materials, you are the ones that got them and provided the pictures and videos, not me. Unlike the traditional media that would be afraid to publish these materials, we are prepared to assume this responsibility. You can count on the bloggers' reliability to get them published (post of July 7, 2008).

Here the blogger emphasizes two important points often raised in the literature on blogs and the mainstream media. The first concerns how blogs work as a form of citizens' media, by opening a space where ordinary people

may voice their concerns using collaboratively-authored platforms. Through these interactive processes, the lay citizen becomes not just a receiver but also a producer of content. Some theorists assume that the inclusion of active readers as authors is assumed to encourage the demystification of the media's authority in ways that break its hegemony.³⁴ The second point concerns the influence of blogging in the public sphere in terms of its capacity to cultivate a reputation for credibility. In the passage from Abbas's blog cited above, the blogger presents his contemporaries in the Egyptian blogosphere as courageous, credible, trustful and indispensable. This encourages an active participation on the part of audiences to send their own reports and to have these cases published with the goal of opening public discussion.

In line with the prevailing critical discourse adopted by blogs in Egypt, most posts by Abbas and his readers direct their accusations at the police and their absence in the street, accusing them of dedicating all of their time and efforts to the security of the regime. Conversely, some comments on *Al-Wa'i al-Masri* also criticize Abbas's and his readers' views, contending that this kind of violence happens everywhere in the world.

A notorious example of how Egyptian bloggers have connected street violence to corruption and the exploitation of power, is the 2008 incident of a woman who assaulted a man with an electric baton after she rear-ended his car. (It is important to remember that in Egypt the lawful use of this kind of equipment is restricted to the police.) First, she uttered foul language and then threatened to notify her father, who she alleged held a senior position in the police (post of August 25, 2008). This post and its accompanying video clip generated a lot of debate (144 comments), captured the attention of

³⁴ C. Rodriguez, *Fissures in the Mediascape: An International Study of Citizens' Media* (New Jersey: Hampton Press, 2001), 153.

independent newspapers that then covered the story, and sparked a campaign on Facebook demanding that the woman be held accountable for her actions.

Although sexual harassment is not a new issue in Egypt, it has been regarded as a taboo topic, and was rarely discussed in the pages of newspapers or on television programs. One of the salient issues that blogging in Egypt has succeeded in putting on the public agenda is the sexual harassment of women. In 2006, during the festival of Eid al-Fitr³⁵ a number of bloggers witnessed an incident in which sexual harassment occurred in a group situation. They recorded these events with their cameras and posted the videos on their blogs while the traditional media, especially at the national level, denied that the events had occurred. Eventually, when the traditional media realized it was swimming against the current, it had no choice but to acknowledge the abuse. Two years after this incident in 2006, another occurred on Eid AlFetr Day in downtown Cairo; in this case, the *Ahram* newspaper was the first media to cover it on the front page. Referring to the article in *Ahram* entitled “32 people that participated in sexual harassment were arrested,” Abbas wondered why they suddenly decided to cover the story even though they denied the previous 2006 event and even ridiculed the bloggers who were the first to report it (post of October 5, 2008).

With respect to the poor conditions of Egyptian workers and the violations of their dignity, *Al-Wa'i al-Masri* also pays a lot of attention to Egyptian-Arabic relations and their impact on Egyptian workers and the kind of treatment they receive from the citizens and authorities of other Arabic countries. This issue of Egyptian-Arabic relations has engendered a lot of debate among Abbas and his readers through 4 posts that generated (303)

³⁵ This is the festival that celebrates the breaking of the fast of Ramadan; it is one of the most important Islamic celebrations in the calendar year.

readers' comments, including readers from the wider Arabic world, which helps to create a rich public space for discussion and for the airing of criticism from the citizens of other Arab countries. Three posts in particular illustrate this tendency, all of which show a video clip of a number of Libyan citizens ridiculing and laughing at Egyptians on a fishing ship. In one post, the blogger wonders: "Why do Libyans seem so smug and pleased to see the Egyptians drown?" Then, he adds forcefully: "The Libyan marines opened fire on Egyptian civilians on the fishing ship. But, these people are poor... and the ship has already capsized." Transcriptions of the insults and swear words uttered by the Libyans in the video, which appear on the blog, foreground the blogger's conclusion: "We [Egyptians] have become the doormat upon which the Bedouins [vulgar term for people in the Arab gulf], the thugs of Hamas in Rafah, and the Americans from ships in the Suez gulf all wipe their feet." He then criticizes Egypt's idle stance and reluctance even to condemn other countries for disrespecting Egyptians. When Abbas added updates and tried to connect the incidences shown in the videos, he sparked a heated debate among his readers. These discussions fuelled nostalgic comparisons between Egypt's past and present, while drawing out many examples of ongoing violations of Egyptian dignity. At the same time, the comments from Abbas and his readers focused their criticism on the regime, as the entity responsible for allowing these incidences to continue and for creating the conditions that place Egypt at an inferior socio-economic position with respect to other Arab countries (post of August 2, 2009; and posts of June 14 and 18, 2008).

Those posts generated a number of comments from blog readers (47 comments for the first post, and 129 comments for the second two posts) in which Abbas and a number of readers assign blame for Egypt's perceived poor reputation on the international scene. They all seem to frame the situation as a

product of what Egyptian citizens are suffering at home due to the poor care they receive from the government.

The tone of these posts is consistent with the inflammatory language that Abbas directs at Arabs in general when he addresses the topic of Egyptian-Arabic relations in his blog. For example, in a remark about an embedded video clip featuring an unflattering song about Egyptians, which spread across the Internet and was attributed to Saudi youth, Abbas invoked a comparison between, on the one hand, the honour and esteem that Egypt has historically enjoyed and, on the other hand, the unjustified derision that Egyptians must now suffer. He accomplishes this comparison through appeals to symbols such as the Egyptian flag from the period of Mohammad Ali's reign, which he displays on his blog as a reminder of what the country has become (post of February 3, 2008).

This issue of Egyptian-Arabic relations has attracted comments not only from both the supporters and critics of Abbas's position but also from the citizens of other Arabic countries who are concerned about related issues. For example, some readers suggested that it was unfair to draw generalizations about a whole country based on only a few particular cases. Writing in an informal and unpunctuated English, one reader named Saeed remarks:

Dear Wael [Abbas],

I am a Jordanian who is frequently reading your blog, and to be honest i like your way of discussing issues that is related to the hot topics in Egypt, but unfortanlty i found you sometimes generalize the Actions of some people to let include all of their nationality. Yes their is some Jordanian hate Egyptions and vise versa and it is same for any mix of two arab countries but the majority will refuse any humiliation to any arab country regarding its place in the map and i need you to know that All Arabs without strong and prosperate egypt are nothing and man for god sake Egypt is the Arab world (90 Million Arab of

300) so be mercifull with the others and don't blame them for the mistakes of the minority (post of February 3, 2008).

Another reader named Makine comments, also in broken English:

We should be angry and we are but not with all Saudis or all Gulf. Only with those who made that hate song. I do not like steryotyping. A thing that we all suffer from. I am sure you have heard "All arabs are terrorists" or "All Moslems are terrorists" because of what a bunch of people who call themselves moslem did. Let's not do what we hate when others do to us (post of February 3, 2008).

These are among 129 other postings about the relationship between Egyptians and Arabs as well as the conditions of Egyptian workers in the Arab countries. Posts of this type make a significant contribution to the formation of an enriched public sphere, characterized by heated discussion. These two examples are among many lines of argument that exhibit strong characteristics of rational critical discourse.

On the other hand, the comments contained an excessive amount of inflammatory language, insults, and snide remarks. The responses were littered with defamatory statements, disparaging comments, derogatory names, and defamation. The vulgarity of the content even prompted one reader to write: "Seriously, this is not an appropriate type of dialogue that we should be having because we are ignoring the main issue as we waste our time swearing at each other" (post of August 2, 2009). In general, the discourse of *Al-Wa'i al-Masri* is explicitly critical, and indulges in a sustained denunciation of the treatment that Egypt has been receiving from other Arab countries. Abbas also sometimes articulates his suspicions about appeals to a universal "Arabic identity" within Egypt. He often contests the discourses of nationalists when he ridicules the policies and personalities of the Nasserites, which

include followers of Nasser's previous regime, and when he derides the Islamists.

Al-Wa'i al-Masri has included coverage of Gaza events and the issue of the Rafah border between Egypt and Gaza. In a featured post, entitled "*Al-Wa'i al-Masri* meets those who were stranded in Rafah and Al Arish," Abbas reports on the Palestinian people of Gaza at the border of Rafah who were receiving donations from the Red Cross as they waited for Egypt to reopen the border and allow them passage to and from Gaza. The coverage included interviews with Palestinians about their views on the factions of Hamas and Fatah (post of September 18, 2007). In another post, which was published at the time of the Israeli attacks on Gaza in 2008, Abbas conducts a similar set of interviews, which include photographs and videos, that together attempted to imitate the look and feel of television news reporting. For example, he employs expressions such as, "We will give you more pictures and reports in a bit," which create the impression that the blog is assuming a journalistic style.

Clearly, throughout his blog, Abbas adopts a critical stance toward Hamas' policy in which he vehemently opposes any breaches to Egyptian borders regardless of the reasons that some might give for doing so. In a post titled "*Al-Wa'i al-Masri* in Gaza," he provides an array of audio-visual materials to document the conditions of everyday life inside Gaza during the Gaza-Israeli war. To contextualize this current event, Abbas often draws on previously archived footage of similar crises, such as the terrorist bombing that occurred in Sinai and Sharm El Sheikh (posts of January 25 and 26, 2008). In another post entitled "No to Hamasan Bullying," Abbas provides photographs that show two Egyptian soldiers injured by Hamas supporters. These images function rhetorically as a rejoinder not only to those who

support Hamas's efforts to open the Rafah border by force but also to those who accuse Egypt of blockading Gaza.

Although Abbas attempts to incorporate journalistic styles and principles into his reporting, unfortunately, his use of foul language in his coverage of the attack by Hamas supporters on Egyptian soldiers undermines these efforts. He frequently employs expletives when imploring all those who defend Hamas, whether they be Islamists, Nasserites, or certain journalists, to concern themselves instead with the problems facing the impoverished citizenry of Egypt. This particular post generated heated discussion and deliberation (93 comments), ranging from brief remarks to comments that approximate essays. A large number of these comments passionately support Abbas, whereas others offer either disinterested analyses or oppose his views. The debate included people who are affiliated with Hamas and the Muslim Brothers, and was an exchange among readers which almost transformed to fighting between two contradictory views; for and against Hamas. Unfortunately, this discourse was full of inflammatory language (post of January 29, 2008). In another post entitled "We warned you that this would happen," which severely criticizes Hamas and its advocates, Abbas parades an image of a news report from the *Al Ahram* newspaper that states: "Palestinians purchase goods from Egypt with false currency." Embedded in the blog, this snippet serves as a resource to buttress his views about Hamas (post of February 1, 2008). In addition, in another post entitled "The project of new Gaza...", Abbas cites an assortment of academic articles and scientific analyses of published international opinion, which he presents as evidence that Hamas has harmed rather than benefited the Palestinian cause (post of February 10, 2008). The strategic inclusion of these authoritative reports from outside sources enables Abbas to lend an aura of objectivity to his strong opinions on

current affairs. Ironically, these commentaries employ fragmented prose and offensive language that suggest, at the same time, a lack of concern for professionalism.

The discourse of *Al-Wa'i al-Masri* seems to explicitly exploit any chance to criticize and condemn the period of the reign of President Abdel Nasser, the Nasserites, and all those who affiliate with the policies of the late President or defend his policies. Even when describing important political and intellectual personalities, Abbas still avoids exercising restraint in his use of foul language. One such criticized voice is Muhammad Hassanein Heikal—a well-known Egyptian and Arab journalist and writer who was associated with Nasser's regime and has written much about him. An internal link in Abbas's blog leads readers to a special file in which writers with different political ideologies critique Heikel's aspersions and responses. Throughout his blog, Abbas declares explicitly his admiration for President Sadat and mentions his merits wherever possible (post of January 17, 2008). For example, Abbas takes advantage of the anniversary of the October 6th, 1973 war with Israel to show his support for Sadat and his criticism of those who undermined Egypt's victory in that war, especially the Nasserites (post of October 6, 2008).

Abbas also gives attention to the poverty and poor conditions of workers and their rights on his blog. For example, he covers the daily lives of the Mahalla workers and their demands. Usually, for these reports, he conducts professional, journalistic-like interviews (post October 23, 2007). In highlighting the widening gap between the rich minority and the poor majority, Abbas comments on the provocative advertisements of resorts and luxuries published in the *Al-Ahram* newspaper. He notes how these images create an impression of tremendous wealth in the country while concealing the fact that a majority of the population live in poverty (post of May 23, 2008).

Another post, entitled “In the age of Mubarak: An Egyptian offers his kidney for selling on the Internet,” further reinforces Abbas’s astonishment about economic disparities in Egypt. This post in particular sparked a lot of debate about the deteriorating conditions of Egypt’s poorest people (post of December 24, 2008).

Table 1 shows that the author of *Al-Wa’i Al-Masri* and its readers consistently denounce the Egyptian regime’s corruption and lack of respect for the law. What is extraordinary about Abbas’s blog and its readers is the dominant attitude of their modes of discourse about politics and public affairs, which is unfailingly and intensely critical, and as such, this discourse could be said to represent a counter public sphere further enhanced by dissidents and political activists mainly from the younger generation. *Al-Wa’i Al-Masri* initiates discussion with its readers about the seven issues described in Table 1 through interactive features which inspire their comments. Abbas’s readers usually are clear about whether they agree or disagree with his viewpoint; they often give more information or provide other facts and eyewitness accounts of the story presented, and at times, they even refute and refuse the veracity of the story. Again, the common attitude of Abbas’s posts and his readers’ comments are predominantly critical in their tone, and the criticism is most often levelled at government policies and officials and their management of Egyptian society.

The category of literary topics in Table 1 includes a limited number of topics (11 posts), which represent less explicitly political interests such as art, literature, and aesthetics; and diaries and personal reflections that rarely are discussed in political blogs generally and on Abbas’s blog in particular. Respectively, four posts cover religious extremism, which address a limited number of incidents scattered across the country, typically involving

altercations between Muslims and Christians. Ironically, although *Al-Wa'i Al-Masri* managed to spark interest in the problem of sexual harassment in 2006 while pushing this issue into the mainstream news agenda in Egypt, attention to this issue has fizzled over time. In subsequent years, just one post in 2008 covered this topic.

The types of issues and topics to which Abbas gives special attention are related to current events as they happen. For this coverage of current events, Abbas uses posts, photographs, and videos to manage and stimulate discussion. Abbas's posts reflect his opinions and political orientation, and in general, his blog seeks to inculcate in his readers' specific attitudes and actions that are in line with his own. The themes that are raised throughout his blog cover a diverse range of current public affairs, and follow a variety of events and issues that concern the Egyptian public in their daily life. Topics pertaining to the civil rights of citizens, issues around freedom of expression, and internet policies in Egypt receive a lot of attention on the blog alongside discussions of socio-economic issues ranging from commentaries on poverty in Egypt to interventions for sexual harassment. Hence, Abbas's blog acts as a political public sphere in which a diversity of topics, concerns, and ideas are offered for public consideration by citizens. Exposure to a diversity of ideas is

a prerequisite to promoting understanding in the course of deliberation.³⁶ Readers use Abbas's blog to wrestle over the significance of anything relevant to political reform, such as concerns about the regime and its instability, including the question of presidential succession, the forging of elections and referenda, civil and human rights, and so on. A number of readers use the

³⁶ A.G. Wilhelm, "Virtual Sounding Boards: How deliberative is Online Political Discussion?" in *Digital Democracy: Discourse and Decision Making in the Information Age* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 156.

comment feature on Abbas's blog to publicize causes in defense of disenfranchised groups, to expose corruption and torture, and to mobilize people politically. In other cases, readers use the blog to mobilize interest in the political process by advertising opportunities to register as a voter in upcoming elections. These notices sometimes include invitations to spread the word of a specific campaign by reposting the advertisements on other websites and blogs (post of October 21, 2008).

Sources of the Posts in *Al-Wa'i Al-Masri*

Blogs share with other types of websites interactive features that characterize the WWW. However, some features are inherent to blogs and are designed to encourage interaction among people, including the archive features, the blog author's email address, links on the homepage to other blogs, links to websites created by others, and links to news sites and trackbacks.

The provision of links to other websites or blogsites within a blog entry is an additional way to include voices other than those of the blogger. Since weblogs are characterized by briefly formulated thoughts and ideas, links are centrally important to the blog genre. As Mortensen and Walker argue, "Links are vital to the genre; take the links out of a weblog and you are left with a web diary, a much more introverted and private form of writing."³⁷ Through links, weblogs enable their audiences to share interconnected information and to participate in discussion.³⁸ *Al-Wa'i Al-Masri*, like any other web-based activity, employs hyperlinks successfully whenever possible to

³⁷ T. Mortensen and J. Walker, "Blogging Thoughts: Personal Publication as an Online Research Tool," in *Researching ICTs in Context* (Oslo: InterMedia Report, 2002), 265.

³⁸ Ibid, 265.

enhance the conversation, enrich knowledge, contextualize the issues raised, facilitate the formation of a specific attitude about the issues raised, and encourage people to act upon them. Hyperlinks also increase the authority of a posted story.³⁹ Table 2 describes the types of links used in the 215 valid blog entries examined by the present study.

Table 2: The type of sources in the posts of *Al-Wa'i Al-Masri*.

Topics of Posts	Number of Hyperlinks						
	Internal links	External links					
		Blogs	Websites	Newspapers	Television channels	Human Rights Organizations	You Tube

³⁹ D. Gillmor, *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People* (Beijing and Cambridge: O'Reilly, 2006), 119.

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				Independent	State /	International	Egyptian	International		
Corruption and inefficiency of the bureaucracy	1	1		1		1				9
Demonstrations and strikes and the response of authority	2	1	1							8
Elections	3									17
Instability of the regime		1								8
Criticism of governmental policies and officials				1						56
Political controversies about previous regimes	5									
Abuse of power	2	10	4	6		3		2	2	38

(persecution and incarceration, torture and police brutality)										
Street violence and thuggery on the Egyptian street										15
Sexual harassment										
Crackdown on bloggers and Internet activists		30	13	11		6			9	11
Freedom of expression on the blogosphere and Internet policies	2	7	1	1		2		1	1	11
Bloggers' activities, discussion about blogging, and reports on speaking engagements in other media		2	15			3	4	12		55
Criticism of the mainstream media		3	2	5	1					8

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Palestine, Gaza events, and Hamas			1					1		3
Religious Extremism	1	1								7
Egyptian-Arabic relations and their impact on Egyptians										10
Poverty in Egypt and workers' issues and their demands			1							5
International affairs and events										39
Arts, literature, and cinema										2
Dairies and personal reflections										1
Totals	16	56	38	25	1	15	4	16	12	303

As is shown in Table 2, the vast number of external hyperlinks that tend to appear in Abbas's blog are to YouTube (303), in most cases, connecting to

the content of Abbas's own YouTube account. The extensive deployment of YouTube video is typical for a blog of this nature, given its aim to capture live video that exposes cases of torture and that covers different kinds of demonstrations, protests, and current events. My research has found that Abbas's blog has been successful in effectively employing hyperlinks to raise certain issues, such as corruption, torture, and the agendas of activists by bringing dissenting voices into the spotlight of the international media and the international community.

The second highest number of hyperlinks direct readers to other blogs (56), followed by links to news websites (38), links to independent Egyptian newspaper websites (25), links to international television stations (16), links to international newspapers sites (15), and finally links to human rights organizations (12). The blog also contains 16 internal hyperlinks to its own archive.

It is worth noting that Abbas links mostly to either independent sources or media that associate with oppositional tendencies with respect to government policies in Egypt. These sources include newspapers such as *Almasry-alyoum*, *Al Dostour*, *Al badeel*, *Alyoum Alsaba*, *Alshorouk*, the *Daily Star Egypt*, *The Arab Times* electronic newspaper, as well as independent television operators such as the *Almehwar* channel, the *Al arabiya.net* website, the *Alhurrah* channel, and the *Aljazeera Arabic* and *Aljazeera English* channels.

Links to human rights organizations also appear in the blog, which include the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, the International Journalists' Network, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Reporters Without Borders, and Global Voices Online. In general, these kinds of organization are the main advocates for bloggers and Internet activists.

Al-Wa'i Al-Masri has extensively used links to the international foreign media to highlight reports about the blogging movement featured on these media sites or to draw attention to Abbas's own contribution to the writing and commentaries on these external sites. Examples of the international news links include the *Menassat* website, the *France 24* channel, the *BBC News* website, the *Los Angeles Times* newspaper, *Le Monde*, *Liberation*, the *Guardian*, the *Washington Post*, the *Al Hayat* newspaper website, *Slate Magazine*, *SBS TV-Australia*, *Radio France International*, the *Fox News* website, and the *CNN* website.

Even though Abbas generously posts links to media that agree with his position, he rarely refers to the national media or what is known as "state-run" media, except to criticize its level of professionalism or to condemn its stance on specific issues.

Comments on the Posts of *Al-Wa'i Al-Masri*

Drawing on Habermas' public sphere theory, Bennett et al. identify three defining requirements for assessing the quality of a mediated public sphere.⁴⁰ Among the three are *responsiveness*, which they conceptualize as a "dialogue or mutual responsiveness between sources with different claims or issue positions."⁴¹ Responsiveness requires that communicants respond to each other. It is the main feature of interactivity that characterizes the quality of communication and deliberation within a public space.⁴² This requirement is

⁴⁰ W.L. Bennett, V.W. Pickard, D.P. Iozzi, C.L. Schroeder, T. Lagos, and C.E. Caswell, "Managing the Public Sphere: Journalistic Construction of the Great Globalization Debate," in *Journal of Communication*, 54(3), (2004): 437-455

⁴¹ Ibid, 438.

⁴² S. Rafaeli, "Interactivity: From New Media to Communication," in *Advancing Communication Science: Merging Mass and Interpersonal Processes* (London: Sage, 1988), 118-120.

fulfilled in the blogosphere whenever exchanges occur between bloggers and readers, and among readers themselves, which can be achieved through the comment feature used in blogs. The comment feature helps participants of these exchanges to facilitate diverse and dynamic discussions, and to promote the perception of involvement because this feature allows bloggers to further the thread of a discussion that they or other participants initiate.⁴³

To assess the degree of dialogue and mutual responsiveness, not only between the blog author and his/her readers, but also among readers themselves, I have randomly chosen the first month in 2008, which consists of 13 posts in total (see Table 3). An analysis of the frequency of user interaction within this sample will enable a determination of whether audience feedback originates from a small group of dedicated readers or from a varied mass of casual readers. It can also provide insight into the nature of the readers who take the time to comment, including whether a reader comments more than once on the same post, which would indicate a certain level of engagement and responsiveness with the author and/or other readers, suggesting that the blog has an ability to create or encourage dialogue about public issues. To identify the number of users who respond to more than one of Abbas's posts, I compiled a list of all the names (or bylines) attached to each comment. I noted duplicates on the list and then counted to reveal the total of unique usernames as well as the number of users who comment regularly on the website. Completing this type of analysis poses a challenge because Abbas does not require his readers to sign up for an account before making a comment on the blog. Since different users may post comments using the same username or a

⁴³ E. Kim, "Are Political Blogs a Different Species? An Examination of Nonelite Political Blogs," Annual Conference of the International Communication Association, May 24-28, 2007, San Francisco, CA, USA.

different byline each time, the identity of the readers who contribute is difficult to establish.

Table 3: The frequency of readers' comments on *Al-Wa'i Al-Masri*.

Action	Frequency	Percentage
	January 2008 (total 13 posts)	
Total number of comments	343	100 %
Number of readers posting more than one comment	114	33.2 %
Number of unique readers posting comments	229	66.8 %

Table 3 shows that a diversity of readers comment and engage in discussion with the blog posts on *Al-Wa'i Al-Masri*. From the total number of the readers' comments ($n = 343$), 229 constitute the number of unique readers posting comments. I calculated this number by subtracting from the total ($n = 343$) the number of duplicate posts (114) using the same username. Among the duplicate posts, I noticed that 28 unique readers commented on more than one article. This result indicates that regular users of the site are interested in consulting many blog posts and participating in the discussion. I also noticed that 31 unique readers posted multiple comments about one article, which indicates that these readers are interested in continuing a discussion that they may have started with other readers or possibly the author. These numbers

suggest that there could be a potential for diverse opinion sharing in the blogosphere in Egypt, given the relatively low number of comments by frequent users of the blog, coupled with the high volume of contributions from first-time visitors. In other words, for example, we may assume that Abbas's blog is in a better position to capture an array of viewpoints in the comments section than would be possible if the site were monopolized by a closed circle of participants.

At this point, it may be helpful to assess the extent to which Abbas's blog fosters civic engagement among his readers, and generates deliberation or critical-rational discussion corresponding to the criteria for the deliberative ideal of a public sphere. For a definable rational conversation to occur, the opinions presented must be logical, relevant, and related to the topic of discussion, all of which are essential parts of the "reason-giving" forms of civic discourse.⁴⁴ Blogs with their commentary features are supposed to facilitate deliberative discussion, and so I examine whether Abbas's blog meets these basic criteria, whether the comments remain on-topic, and whether the comments within a given thread of discussion are connected to each other.

I have chosen the issue of Palestine, Gaza events, and Hamas from among the rest discussed on the blog, which are characterized as the most controversial, and could be classified as opinion posts that express Abbas's opinion. These issues are expected to generate conflict and opposing ideological views in ways that encourage political debate. Since these topics were rarely discussed on the blog in 2007 and 2009, it seemed reasonable to analyze the year 2008 when these issues received attention in 6 posts throughout the year, and generated 275 readers' comments. By using a specific

⁴⁴ See Meraz, "Analyzing Political Conversation on the Howard Dean Candidate Blog"

set of categories, Table 4 illustrates the nature of the readers' comments addressed to the 6 posts regarding the issue of Palestine, Gaza events, and Hamas.

Table 4: Characteristics of readers' comments concerning selected 2008 blog posts.

Post titles	Total	Agrees with author					Ambiguous					Disagrees with author				
		Comment / opinion (on topic)	Interpretation	Factual + Informative	Irrelevant comment (off)	Inflammatory language	Comment / opinion (on topic)	Interpretation	Factual + Informative	Irrelevant comment (off)	Inflammatory language	Comment / opinion (on topic)	Interpretation	Factual + Informative	Irrelevant comment (off)	Inflammatory language
No To Hamasan Bullying	93	40	10	5	2	17*	14	0	1	2	1*	7	11	1	0	5*
Pictures from Gaza	15	11	3	1	0	0										
<i>Al-Wa'i al-Masri</i> in Gaza	19	16	3	0	0	1*										
We warned you that this	41	20	2	1	0	10*	8	0	0	5	0	4	1	0	0	2*

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would happen																
New Gaza project...	35	15	4	4	0	1*	2	5	1	1	0	1	2	0	0	0
Why Egypt not Israel!!!	72	37	10	3	6	6*	0	1	1	0	0	3	3	0	8	2
Total	275	139	32	14	8	35*	24	6	3	8	1*	15	17	1	8	9*

Note: Numbers indicated with an asterisk (*) are excluded from the totals because they merely indicate whether inflammatory language was used in any of the posts.

To contextualize the analysis of the posts and comments about this event, as presented on the blog, some brief background information is necessary. In January 2008, during the Israeli-Gaza war, Egypt was subjected to growing public pressure from home and abroad. Part of the blame and responsibility for the blockade in Gaza was shifted from Israel to Egypt, and Egypt was asked to take action to relieve the suffering in Gaza. Calls for donations and solidarity prevailed across Egypt, especially from members of the Muslim Brotherhood and those sympathetic with pan-Arabic ideologies. During the abovementioned war, Hamas breached the border separating Gaza from Egypt, and a number of Egyptian soldiers were shot and injured by Hamas.

Abbas's blog provoked a debate about the actions of the Hamas government and its supporters. He claimed that people in Gaza are rich and do not need donations and subsidies from Egypt. He contested the efforts exerted by the Muslim Brotherhood and others to collect money and mobilize demonstrations against Egypt's position. However, Abbas emphasized that he directs his attack and criticism at Hamas not at the Palestinian people. Abbas also expressed his nationalistic zeal and pride in the primacy of Egyptian identity over other modes of belonging. I have characterized his readers' comments on this issue in terms of their agreement or disagreement with Abbas's view.

As Table 4 shows, the majority of readers' comments (178 or 64, 7 %) were general comments and merely expressions of opinion. At the same time, the majority of readers' comments (193 or 70%) expressed agreement with Abbas's view, and supported others who adopted the same stance. Only 18 comments (6.5%) added information or new facts. Fifty-five comments (20%) presented interpretations that could be characterized as reason-giving. Some readers appeared to draw on their own experiences, such as personal encounters with the actors featured in some of the posts, either as evidence to confirm the information presented on the blog or to provide additional insight and interpretation. In addition to the Egyptian readership, the nationality of users varied widely, and included representation from Palestine, Hamas, and Saudi Arabia, as well as contributors from the United States, Canada, and Germany. This diversity enriched the breadth of discussion around these controversial topics. Unfortunately, most exchanges among readers digressed into skirmishes that employed derogatory language (45 comments), which hindered their ability to achieve critical rationality and logical dialogue. Most of the time, frequent resorts to *ad hominem* lines of attack and argumentation

derailed the focus of a discussion thread, leading to a number of irrelevant comments (24 comments). The preceding observations are consistent with a pattern described by Dailey, Demo and Spillman in their analysis of comments that appeared in a sample of newspaper political blogs. They noticed how civil discussions of politics soon “degenerated into socially questionable references to scatological functions, procreative activities and lower extremity body parts.”⁴⁵

Interestingly, some users of Abbas’s blog seemed to be aware of the problem just mentioned. Comments that explicitly voiced concerns about the vitriolic tone of the rhetoric not only in the readers’ comments but also in Abbas’s posts became part of the discussion. Even though many participants stressed the importance of the blog, Abbas’s readership (in 22 comments) indignantly expressed their resentment about the language used on the site. These objections often accompanied calls for a more civilized and ethical way of expressing views. It may be reasonably assumed that readers feel compelled to employ derogatory and inflammatory language most likely because Abbas has set the stage for this type of behaviour through his own writing style. This serious defect undermines the blog’s status as a forum for deliberative discourse and credible opinion.

With respect to the extent to which the discussion meets the criteria of rational critical discourse, Table 5 shows that only 20 percent of readers’ comments moved beyond merely expressing opinions to using various arguments to convincingly justify and support their statements. The majority of readers’ postings (64.7%) were merely comments or expressions of their opinions without valid arguments or reasons. Moreover, the postings that

⁴⁵ L. Dailey, L. Demo, and M. Spillman, “Newspaper Political Blogs Generate Little Interaction,” in *Newspaper Research Journal*, 29(4), (2004): 62.

provided information or new facts were few (6.5%). Thus, the embedded knowledge and the truth of the readers' statements were not defended, suggesting that the overall quality of the conversation on the blog did not support deliberative and democratic discussion, which is defined as the extent to which the discussion is "substantive, practical questions debated rationally in contradiction to *ad hominem* argumentation not susceptible to criticism and grounding."⁴⁶

Although the blog provoked discussion among those who posted comments, the extent of the contact between Abbas and his readers remained minimal. In fact, I noted only one reply from Abbas to a reader's comment, and some mutual responses between readers, mostly to exchange accusations, which crossed the line between reasoned argument and personal prejudice. Positions taken by readers were neither rationally criticized nor evaluated by others who comment on the same post. As a result, it can be concluded that Abbas's blog fails to satisfy the basic criteria of a critical rational discourse. In general, I find that *Al-Wa'i Al-Masri* fails to foster discussion corresponding to the criteria of the deliberative ideal and public sphere as outlined in the literature.

An analysis of the comments on Abbas's posts also shows that they do not remain on-topic. In other words, they are not related to each other in a way that constitutes a continuous and coherent thread or line of thinking. Rather, most responses do not engage in reasoned opinion; instead, most of the comments are based on emotional reasoning and very often decay into simple name-calling. However, the blog succeeded in stimulating discussions among a variety of readers with respect to such controversial issues as Gaza

⁴⁶ Wilhelm, "Virtual Sounding Boards," 162.

and Hamas, providing space for the exchange of views and opinions even if they do not reach the level of critical rational discourse.

Conclusion: Blogs, Politics, and the Public Sphere in Egypt

Since the scope of the present paper is limited to a case study of a famous political blog, I cannot generalize my findings from this case to the whole population of political blogs or to blogs as a whole. However, this case study gives a clear picture of the political discourse of Egyptian political blogging. Thus, the *Al-Wa'i Al-Masri* case study gives rise to the following conclusions.

First, a relationship exists between the type of sources in the blog posts and the destination of hyperlinks provided within the posts, and another between the tone of the discourses towards the government and the policies of the political regime in Egypt. The blog functions effectively by using these types of sources that resonate with the tone of the blog's discourse, which has been characterized as oppositional, critical, and denunciatory. Moreover, Abbas's blog depends on sources that are affiliated with independent and oppositional newspapers, satellite television programs, and the information quoted from human rights organizations' websites. These sources provide critical and oppositional views to the Egyptian government, especially with regards to the issue of torture, and the crackdown on Internet and political activists. In contrast, Abbas's blog rarely incorporates links to the Egyptian national media except when they serve as a condemnation of its position towards some issues or criticism of its content.

Second, another relationship exists between the rates of readers' participation—through their comments on the blog posts or their participation in providing audio and video materials—and the general topics

of discussion. These comments and participation from the public increase when the topics of the posts are mainly about controversial political issues. For example, some of these controversies include the denouncement of the regime's corruption, its bureaucracy, and its leaders; the lack of respect for the rule of law; criticism of the abuse of power; demonstrations, strikes, and the regime's subsequent response; and the crackdown on Internet activists. Conversely, readers' comments decrease when the topics of the posts do not touch on the social and concomitant effects experienced by the general Egyptian population, who ultimately are becoming aware, in part through the unprecedented coverage provided by bloggers, that they are being oppressed.

Third, the discourse on *Al-Wa'i Al-Masri* is overwhelmingly hostile to the government and supportive of empowering the people. Often, government regulations and involvement in society are negatively portrayed. The level of criticism is often so scorching that it moves beyond the borders of civil discourse and debate, especially when critiquing the government and its apparatuses at various levels, including the main political players, i.e., President Mubarak and his son Gamal Mubarak, the Prime Minister, the Minister of the Interior, and the security apparatus. However, when the topic of discussion touches on Internet activists, human rights activists, or the oppression of the common people, comments and posts are generally very positive.

Fourth, Abbas explicitly shows his opposition to the Nasserites, Arab nationalists and pan-Arab ideology, and all things affiliated with Nasserist thought. Usually, this criticism falls on opposition parties, writers, and intellectuals like the well-known writer Muhammad Hassanein Heikal who Abbas criticizes extensively. Additionally, Abbas also criticizes the Islamists, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Hamas in the Gaza strip.

Fifth, Egyptian bloggers have brought matters to public attention that the traditional media have long ignored. This fact is extremely evident with respect to the issues of sexual harassment, torture against detainees, exploitation of power, thuggery in the streets, workers' civil rights and their protests to improve their economic living conditions, and calls for political change and reform. Within the Egyptian context, bloggers and blogs have set the agenda about important yet under discussed issues, and have helped to discover unspoken truths not covered by the traditional media.

Sixth, the blog in Egypt plays an important role in documenting human rights violations in their different aspects and different levels, and also in using multimedia such as audio and video, photographs, caricatures, and so on to encourage people to participate and comment. Indeed, the blog opens the door for citizens to speak their voice and participate effectively through their comments, their roles as eye-witnesses, or by providing materials, for example, videos. Hence, *Al-Wa'i al-Masri* and political blogs in general have been successful in breaking down a psychological barrier for people who have felt that to speak about these issues was forbidden and should not even be considered. Likewise, thanks to *Al-Wa'i al-Masri* in particular and blogging in general in Egypt, the bar of freedom of expression has been raised for the traditional Egyptian media, especially the independent printing press and broadcast journalism. As a result, and in Keren's words, the blogosphere "has opened up the mainstream media to voices from the margins [...] and formed a complex network of opinion sharing in which personal trust, rather than institutional reputation, becomes the source of opinion formation."⁴⁷

Seventh, blogs also have played an important role in providing story ideas and information for the traditional media to develop and follow.

⁴⁷ Keren, *Blogosphere*, 16.

Therefore, blogs are part of the competitive sphere of news gathering and reporting, often providing alternative content to what is presented in the traditional media. For example, in his blog, Abbas has provided elaborate coverage of important issues, acting as a professional investigative journalist, which include in-depth coverage of important events supported by his blog archive, Twitter feed, and hyperlinks to other materials. Specific examples of Abbas's extensive coverage include the reports about the civil rights of the workers of Mahalla, the event in which Egyptian army cadets attacked a police station with stones in a town south of Cairo, and the people who were left stranded on the Rafah border between Egypt and Gaza. By using Twitter feed services on his blog, Abbas covered the following events as they happened: the devastating fire at the Shura Council building; the April 6th strike and other demonstrations; and the trial of the police officer involved in the notorious torturing of Imad Elkabeer. In five posts in 2007, Abbas provided detailed coverage of the police officer's trial accompanied by many photos and videos, which enabled his readers to gain a powerful insight into the court proceedings.

It seems that Abbas has been sensitive about the credibility of his blog, since he repeatedly mentions his sources for news and other materials. For example, he may say "this video arrived to me from an anonymous citizen" or when he explicitly mentions that he is not the source of a specific topic, attributing it directly to the original source, or when he sometimes explains the procedures he follows to acquire specific information (post of January 19, 2008). Despite his professionalism in covering issues, Abbas's language usually degenerated into name-calling and insults, which encourage some readers to use their own acrimonious interchanges and insults. Conversely,

many of his readers' comments contest this kind of inflammatory language, and call for the debate to be civilized and ethical.

Clearly blogs have succeeded in raising issues and the concerns about which the mainstream media rarely speak, while empowering people who otherwise would be without access to the traditional media or the public sphere. Descriptions of blogs as "alternative media" or "citizen's media" are a commonplace in the literature. Although this may be true, it also can be argued that blogs and mainstream media enjoy a symbiotic relationship. The mainstream media turns to blogs for content, such as story ideas, leads, and confirmations. Media institutions even recruit bloggers, for example, *The Guardian* newspaper has recruited the famous Iraqi blogger Salam Pax to write a column. In addition, some media outlets host a blogging platform on their own websites with an aim to encourage bloggers to populate their newspapers with user-generated content.⁴⁸

Bloggers also need mainstream media, not only as news sources to support their blogging but also to maximize their publicity. Abbas augmented his social status in the real world thanks in part to the mainstream media that provided him with opportunities to speak at conferences and receive media attention. Such publicity created the conditions for a wider reception of his blog videos and posts, many of which were reproduced frequently in newspapers and aired on television stations. However, the state-run media rarely, if ever, publicizes the activities of bloggers. On the one hand, the extent of the blogosphere's penetration of the traditional media is confined to the independent and oppositional media in Egypt, and on the other to international networks. Abbas has published more than forty posts that

⁴⁸ J.W. Rettberg, *Blogging: Digital Media and Society Series* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 110.

document his promotional efforts, such as his regular appearances in broadcast and print media, both locally and internationally, whenever he comments on the general practice of blogging in Egypt and the specific issues that he raises on his website.

The symbiotic relationship between blogs and mainstream media is necessary for maximizing the advantages of blogging. Blogs are a new medium with an unprecedented level of freedom that give ordinary people a public space to argue and discuss or deliberate about issues that for a long time were considered taboo. As Al Malky emphasizes:

The future of political blogging in Egypt greatly depends on its fostering links with mainstream independent media, links which will likely determine whether blogs are seen as enclaves of marginal opinion and hearsay, or rather as venues for news and commentary deeply rooted in Egyptian society and central to its political life.⁴⁹

So, if the mainstream independent media collaborate with bloggers, democratic culture and public awareness can only benefit.

Carroll and Hackett call the communicative network initiatives, which seek to democratize communication and challenge corporate media power, “democratic media activism.” They define the latter as “emergent movement praxis” and as a kind of new social movement: “A movement that sees democratization of communication as a crucial counter-measure against the shifting forms of control and domination that, in collapsing boundaries between public and private, also politicizes the personal.”⁵⁰ In this form of democratic media activism, civil society or “grassroots” organizations try to

⁴⁹ R. Al Malky, “Blogging for Reform: The Case of Egypt,” *Arab Media & Society*, www.arabmediasociety.com/articles/downloads/20070312143716_AMS1_Rania_Al_Malky.pdf (accessed May 25, 2008).

⁵⁰ W.K. Carroll and R.A. Hackett, “Democratic Media Activism through the lens of Social Movement Theory,” in *Media, Culture & Society*, 28(1), (2006): 85, 96.

cultivate a critical audience through public outreach, and try to push the media practices and strategies of institutions in a “direction that enhances democratic values and subjectivity as well as equal participation in public discourse and social decision-making.”⁵¹ In this context, political blogging can be evaluated as a form of media democratic activism because bloggers make efforts to promote an enhanced awareness of the unspoken issues that the mainstream media ignore and attempt to stimulate discussion and thought about these silences with the hope of fostering social change.

As a form of activism, political blogging has been counted among the critical social movements that are driving political reforms in Egypt. Political bloggers in Egypt are considered to be activists who are directly involved in politics, using their blogs for political mobilizations and campaigns. As was illustrated in interviews that I conducted with bloggers and Internet activists, political bloggers take up causes that support the common public good and they are motivated to exploit the blogging medium and all kinds of personal digital media to this end. Political bloggers are positioning themselves within a number of emerging movements in Egypt, such as the Kefaya Movement, the Egyptian Movement for Change, the April 6th Movement, blogger and youth movements, as well as making inroads with groups of independent-minded judges, journalists, and university professors, and so on. Since 2004, many political protest movements have emerged in Egypt, which have culminated in a recent initiative for change called “The National Front for Change” created by Mohamed ElBaradei in February 2010.

Apart from raising issues that complement the agendas of such movements, which seek genuine democratic reforms and fight corruption, bloggers and their readers help to open a public space for deliberation and

⁵¹ Ibid, 84.

discussion about issues of concern that otherwise would be unavailable. Bloggers play an important role in publicizing these movements and in mobilizing the participation of the masses, especially youth, in organized events. As Eltahawy says when commenting on the role of bloggers in Egypt: “The bloggers were the electronic pamphleteers for the street activists. At times, they were both one and the same—blogger and activist.”⁵² For example, the blogging community supported Kefaya by posting banners that called for a prohibition against hereditary rule, the release of Kefaya activists, and the enforcement of anti-torture laws.⁵³

The prominence of blogging can be associated with the rise of these social movements, since the relationship between blogging movements and other forms of conventional activism are mutually sustaining. Carroll and Hackett describe the relation between media activism and other forms of activism: “Media activism thrives, and can only thrive, in conjunction with other democratic movements. As it thrives, it facilitates those movements.”⁵⁴ In a feature article, Al Malky points to the impact of blogging on the Kefaya initiative:

If Kefaya has provided the political space for voices of opposition to speak out, blogs have provided the means for Kefaya’s mobilization. Not only have bloggers continued to challenge the official version of events, exposing a wide array of abuses by Egypt’s authorities and monitoring fellow activists’ lives in jail, they have also rallied other

⁵²M. Eltahawy, “Arab Blogs: Or how I learned to stop worrying and to love Middle East dictators,” *Arab Media & Society*, www.arabmedia.society.com/articles/downloads/20070312143351_AMS1_Mona_Eltahawy.pdf (accessed May 25, 2008), 2.

⁵³ N. Oweidat, C. Benard, D. Stahl, W. Kildani, E. O’Connell, and A.K. Grant, *The Kefaya Movement: A Case Study of a Grassroots Reform Initiative* (USA: RAND Corporation, 2008), www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG778.pdf (accessed December 12, 2009), 23.

⁵⁴ Carroll and Hackett, “Democratic Media Activism,” 92.

activists to the cause by publicizing Kefaya demonstrations often overlooked by mainstream publications.⁵⁵

It should be stressed that Al Malky does not confine the role of blogging to providing the means for Kefaya's specific political ends; he also notes that bloggers help to secure a public space for voices to speak out on broader, related issues.

Bloggers work as campaigners and support the activities of solidarity groups that represent powerless and marginalized people who are not just fellow activists detained or jailed (e.g., the "Free Alaa" and "Free Kareem" campaigns) but also anyone who may have been subjected to oppression by the authorities. As has been shown by this paper, bloggers such as Abbas have fulfilled this role by documenting injustices through video and audio recordings of physical and sexual abuses and other violations of human rights.

It is important to remember that political bloggers are not only working on the Internet. They rarely remain glued to their computers or stay tied to their desktops. Rather, they also work in the streets and put themselves at risk, whenever they capture the news beat with their own cameras and deliver reports on current events using their real names. The tumultuousness of their activities and their ability to take risks and generate buzz around political topics is precisely what sets Egyptian bloggers apart from Internet activists in other Arab countries. Moreover, they contribute more to political discussion than mere expression of opinion. For these reasons, even if their tone of discourse appears to be cynical and sceptical, the assumption should not be made that political bloggers are as melancholic as Michael Keren has argued.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, Keren's claim about blogging as "emancipatory" does seem to

⁵⁵ Al Malky, "Blogging for Reform," 4.

⁵⁶ Keren, *Blogosphere*, 12-14.

ring true with respect to the situation in Egypt. He suggests that the “blogosphere may be conceptualized as the arena in which the newly emancipated individuals... are defining their particularistic identities vis à vis an *ancien régime* consisting of traditional politics and the mainstream media.”⁵⁷ However, the Egyptian example does not resonate with his conclusion that the blogosphere constitutes a failed type of emancipation.

From my close observations during my research period, the frequency of posts on *Al-Wa'i al-Masri* has been decreasing gradually. For example, the number of posts in 2009 is less than in previous years and continues the annual decrease. I also have noticed a growing trend toward an extensive use of Twitter on Abbas’s blog. For example, after he began to use this new micro blogging platform on a regular basis, the frequency of his blog posts decreased significantly. This phenomenon raises doubts about the future of blogging in the long term, especially in light of the un-stoppable emergence of new forms of communication technologies, and in light of the lifecycle of bloggers. To a great extent, blogging is done by a specific age group, and no one knows what will happen when the bloggers of today grow old. Will they transform or move to another form? Similar anxieties about technological change have surfaced before in conjunction with other modes of political communication on the Internet that were used enthusiastically and extensively before blogging. Usually, interest in these modes, such as discussion groups, Usenet newsgroups, MUDs (Multi-User Domains) eventually faded as well. Commenting on this tendency, Saeed Elmasry, Head of the Social Issues Program affiliated with the Egyptian Cabinet, Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC) made a similar prediction when we talked about the future of blogging in Egypt:

⁵⁷ Ibid, 9.

In the future, young people might gravitate more to platforms that are more interactive and social. In my view, I believe that more young people will be involved with Facebook, which is more functional for networking and mobilizing. However, blogs might transform the practices of online newspapers, especially the political blogs and bloggers who are keen to be more famous and effective. I also am wondering about when the effectiveness of blogging will wither. Moreover, when bloggers feel that their impact on the ground is real, they might decide to move to a large online newspaper and perhaps take on a role like editor-in-chief (S. Elmasry, personal interview, March 5, 2009).

In other words, he argues that blogging could be used as a means to an end, for example, as in a new phenomenon that is beginning to take shape—the publishing of blogs as books. Three literary blogs have been turned into books published by the Dar Elshrouk Publishing House in Egypt. Since their publication, the authors of these blogs have stopped blogging, and their presence in the public sphere outside of blogs has become greater than blogging itself. Elmasry suggests that:

Blogging also is a venue for discovering literary talents, especially in light of the lack of traditional institutions to perform this role. In Egypt, literary talents have come to light through blogging, and otherwise, they would have remained in the back stage (for example, Roz Blaban's *Rice With Milk* and Aaiz Atgawaz's *I Want to Marry*) (S. Elmasry, personal interview, March 5, 2009).

These reservations and reflections about the future of blogging in Egypt and elsewhere do not detract from the implications of blogging, specifically political blogging for democracy and for change. Many examples exist of how bloggers are influencing the agenda of traditional media coverage, and of how blogs are forcing once silent issues onto the national agenda.

With its casual discussion and informal deliberation over controversial issues normally avoided by the mainstream media, blogging has had an

undeniable impact on democratic culture and public opinion in Egypt. With the centrality and ubiquity of new media technologies, the character of politics and public space is being reconstituted. Hence, it is important to recognize and appreciate how informal political conversations among ordinary people occur in such public spaces, whether online or offline, and how these engagements relate to the formation of democratic culture.⁵⁸ Clearly, the political blogosphere discourse is dominated by the subjectivity and rhetorical style of the blogger. Unfortunately, this focus on projecting a personality while blogging tends to limit the discussion around the author's views, and in turn decreases the diversity of spaces available for participants to debate and discuss.

Even though blogging is unable to fulfill the criteria of a fully rational public sphere in the Habermasian sense, the blogosphere still raises political implications for democracy in Egypt. Drawing on an empirical study, Wyatt et al. argue that personal conversations or what they call "ordinary political conversation[s]" occur in private spaces, such as at home, work and in civil organizations, and they are a vital component of actual democratic practice that can have political consequences. Applying this general insight to the political blogosphere in particular, a conclusion can be drawn that blogging constitutes a continuation of "ordinary political conversations." However, it is worth adding that blogging in Egypt also encourages not merely idle conversation but greater action in the public sphere, both offline and on.

⁵⁸ R.O. Wyatt, E. Katz, and J. Kim, "Bridging the Spheres: Political and Personal Conversation in Public and Private Spaces," in *Journal of Communication*, 50(1), (2000): 72.

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