

# How the Facebook Arabic Page “We Are All Khaled Said” Helped Promote the Egyptian Revolution

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## Abstract

This study analyzes how the owner of the Facebook Arabic page “We Are All Khaled Said” both catalyzed and took advantage of opportunities in the Egyptian political climate in order to help promote the country’s 2011 revolution. Using a content analysis of posts on the Facebook page before and throughout the Egyptian revolution, the case study finds that the owner of the page, Wael Ghonim, served as a long-term trainer or coach, educating his online followers about the abuses of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak’s regime and helping them gradually become more comfortable with political activism, so that when a triggering event—the Tunisian revolution—occurred, he was able to move his followers into the streets to protest. Two other particularly successful tactics were utilized by Ghonim: He capitalized on a powerful personal story—that of a young man brutally killed by the police—in order to elicit emotion and help others identify with the cause, and he used lofty rhetoric to convince his followers that their actions could actually make a difference. The case study disproves Gladwell’s (2010) claim that social media is a platform for shallow and networked interactions, finding both that the grievances and ideas shared on this page were remarkably substantive and that the movement was not a network but rather a hierarchy, led by Ghonim until his imprisonment. The study suggests that social media is a more powerful platform for promoting political change than previously appreciated and offers important lessons for political activists.

## Keywords

social media, Egyptian revolution, social change, political activism

## Introduction

On 11 February 2011, the 30-year rule of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak came to an end when it was announced that he would step down after just 18 days of protests on the streets of Egypt. It has become a truism in the mainstream media and scholarly work that social media contributed significantly to the revolution. The Facebook Arabic page “We Are All Khaled Said” and those of the 6 April Youth Movement, Egypt’s National Association for Change, Kefaya, and Egyptian preacher Amr Khaled actively supported the protests, reaching millions of Egyptians (Ali, 2011, p. 185; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012, p. 364). In the 2 weeks preceding and the initial days of the protests, 32,000 Facebook groups and 14,000 Facebook pages were created in Egypt; after a 5-day blackout, on the day the Internet was restored in Egypt, Facebook saw its largest number of active users ever in the nation (Ali, 2011, pp. 186–187). The revolution therefore appears to offer a powerful case study for how social media can be successfully harnessed by those attempting to promote political change.

It is also clear that the use of social media alone is insufficient to foster regime change: Iran, for example, is home to the largest Internet-using population in the Middle East (Internet World Stats, 2014). Yet, the use of social media as part of protests challenging the 2009 election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was ultimately unsuccessful and Ahmadinejad retained the Presidency until 2013, despite the presence of other social media tools deemed pivotal in the cases of the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions, such as iconic video of the death of 26-year-old Neda Agha-Soltan during the Iranian protests. Likewise, the use of social media to document the gross human rights violations of the government of Syria against its own people has to date failed to end the rule

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of President Bashar al-Assad. This raises important questions about the factors that made the Egyptian revolution successful while other protests against regimes in the region have failed.

This case study therefore analyzes the Facebook Arabic page “We Are All Khaled Said” to determine how it helped promote the Egyptian revolution. Using a content analysis of postings on the page before and during the street protests of January–February 2011, this study finds that the success of this page in helping spark the revolution is due in large part to the manner in which its owner “softened” his followers by educating them and gradually helping them become accustomed to and comfortable with greater levels of activism, so that they were prepared to mobilize when a triggering event—in this case, the Tunisian revolution—occurred. The page’s success is also due to the manner in which it harnessed a powerful human story and employed empowering rhetoric to convince citizens that they could make a difference. The findings suggest that the Egyptian revolution was less spontaneous than has been popularly portrayed and offer important lessons for activists seeking to utilize social media to promote political and social change. The study’s findings that the interactions on the Facebook page were deeply substantive and hierarchical also disprove Gladwell’s (2010) claim that social media fosters shallow, networked interactions and “small change.”

## Literature Review

Since the Arab Spring, a significant amount of scholarly research has already focused on the contributions of social media to the uprisings, and scholars nearly universally attribute an important role to such platforms (Ali, 2011; Alqudsi-ghabra, 2012; Chebib & Sohail, 2011; Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011; Gerbaudo, 2012; Herrera, 2014; Howard & Hussain, 2011; Khamis & Vaughn, 2011; Lim, 2012; Lynch, 2011; Mason, 2012; Suarez, 2011; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012; Wilson & Dunn, 2011). In analyzing the role of social media in Tunisia and Egypt specifically, Howard and Hussain (2011, pp. 41-42) identify four phases of the revolutions. The first phase—preparation—was characterized by “activists using digital media in creative ways to find one another, build solidarity around shared grievances, and identify collective political goals.” Next came the ignition phase, “involving an incident that the state-run media ignored, but which came to wide notice online and enraged the public.” In the case of Tunisia, this was the self-immolation of 26-year-old fruit vendor Mohamed Bouazizi in an act of protest against his inability to support himself after municipal officials confiscated his wares. In Egypt, the ignition was the example of Tunisia’s successful revolution. The third phase was street protests, followed by international buy-in, and then climax as regimes tumbled.

Popular anger in Egypt was also stoked by images of the body of 28-year-old citizen Khaled Said, who was killed by

local police the previous June. Howard and Hussain (2011) note that

what ignites popular protest is not merely an act of regime violence . . . but the diffusion of news about the outrage by networks of family, friends and then strangers who step in when the state-run media ignore the story. (p. 43)

Indeed, in the cognitive science literature, Slovic (2007) has reported that the human brain may be designed to detect small changes in the environment, making it difficult for people to conceptualize large-scale problems and numbers of people. He argues that this principle—which he calls “psychophysical numbing”—explains why people will react emotionally to the story of a single human being but be less outraged by statistics or other more general descriptions of political and social problems.

In addition to arousing anger, scholars have found that social media also helped drive the Egyptian people into the streets. According to the theory of “information cascades,” many people in a nation ruled by a dictator may be unhappy with their government, but because they may keep their feelings to themselves, the extent of dissatisfaction within the population will not be appreciated until a few people start to protest, catalyzing a larger group to join them (Lohmann, 1994). Shirky (2008) notes that mass public action will not happen until “everyone knows that everyone knows that everyone knows” (p. 163) that a government’s actions are unacceptable. Lynch (2011) notes that “on this view, the increased public incidence of oppositional views online helps to encourage others who privately hold such views to express them in public” (p. 304).

In the case of Egypt, social media was used to make Egyptians aware of mobilizations in the streets. A study of protesters in Tahrir Square found that 28.3% first heard about the demonstrations on Facebook—the second most common source of information, after face-to-face communication, through which 48.4% of protesters became aware of the mobilizations (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012, p. 370). In all, 52% of protesters had a Facebook profile, and almost every one of them used it to communicate about the demonstrations (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012, p. 369).

Shirky (2008) argues that social media technology has made it easier for people to share information rapidly; in the case of Egypt, he noted before the revolution that “these tools allow citizens to report the news when they see it, without having to go through (or face delay and censorship by) official news channels . . . [and to] coordinate these users’ reactions to the state” (p. 186). Jenkins (2006) likewise notes that, as part of a new “participatory culture,” citizens do not merely consume, but also produce, news.

Shirky (2008) also notes that social media platforms have reduced the costs and difficulty of coordination among large groups of people as well as the need for hierarchy, making collective action easier. According to him (Shirky, 2008),

by making it easier for groups to self-assemble and for individuals to contribute to group effort without requiring formal management (and its attendant overhead), these tools have radically altered the old limits on the size, sophistication, and scope of unsupervised effort. (p. 21)

Mason (2012) likewise argues that “network relationships” were responsible for fomenting revolutions in Egypt and elsewhere and that “what we’ve seen . . . , above all in the events of 2009-11, are revolts led by fragmented . . . people” (p. 81).

In the case of Egypt, Gerbaudo (2012) argues that social media helped activists “choreograph” their collective, offline actions and that this process was led by

reluctant leaders or “anti-leaders”: leaders who, subscribing to the ideology of horizontalism, do not want to be seen as leaders in the first place but whose scene-setting and scripting work has been decisive in bringing a degree of coherence to people’s spontaneous and creative participation in the protest movements. (p. 13)

Gerbaudo (2012, pp. 75, 135) attributes a leading role to youth who were on Facebook and helped take protests into the streets and mobilize the lower classes who were not online, but also argues that social media communicators have become the leaders of modern social movements. In evaluating other social movements, Juris (2012) argues that a “logic of networking” describes social movements of the late 1990s and 2000s, which used listservs and websites to coordinate with one another, but that modern social movements additionally use social media as part of a “‘logic of aggregation,’ which involves the assembling of masses of individuals from diverse backgrounds within physical spaces” (pp. 260-261).

Herrera (2014) finds that social media was used during the Egyptian revolution to spread “virtual memes,” called “vemes,” which she defines as “ideas whose conception, birth, and proliferation occur inside virtual spaces. Social media is a giant veme machine where vemes spread and evolve like a fast-growing organism” (p. 117). Herrera (2014) attributes the success of the “We Are All Khaled Said” page in helping foment anger to the way in which it “spread the meme of martyrdom through modern techniques of online marketing” (pp. 55, 59, 150). For example, the page launched at the beginning of the Egyptian weekend, when Internet usage would be at its peak, and posts often ended with questions or challenges so that “members of the page were constantly being pushed to participate directly in the cause.” Herrera (2014) also finds that the charisma of the posts created “an emotional connection with members” (p. 63). Herrera (2014) argues that social media allowed the disenfranchised to stage a revolution because “a beauty of virtual spaces is that anyone with access can excel as a virtual warrior. Virtual intelligence is not contingent on a person’s formal schooling, material wealth, class position, religion,

sex, age, or connection to power” (pp. 156-157). Rather, what is required is “the ability to innovate within the virtual architecture.”

Scholars also focus on the role of social media in documenting the protests and making it difficult for the government to suppress or obfuscate information about what was happening in the streets (Howard & Hussain, 2011, p. 43; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012, p. 376). Some speculate that the reason why Egyptian security forces largely held their fire when confronting demonstrators was due to their awareness that their every move was being recorded and could be live-streamed to the world (Howard & Hussain, 2011, pp. 43-44).

Ironically, scholars also note that the Egyptian regime’s decision to cut off Internet access for 5 days beginning on 28 January 2011 played at least partially into the hands of their opposition (Ali, 2011; Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011, p. 1217; Gerbaudo, 2012, pp. 67-69; Howard & Hussain, 2011; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012, p. 364). “Middle-class Egyptians, denied home Internet access, took to the streets in larger numbers than ever, many driven by an urge simply to find out what was going on” (Howard & Hussain, 2011, p. 39). More than a million Egyptians participated in protests following the Internet blackout, reflecting as much as a tenfold increase in participation (Ali, 2011, pp. 186-187). The blackout also outraged the international community, including United States President Barack Obama, who pledged to stand up for human rights in Egypt (Ali, 2011, p. 186).

Research on the revolutions also focuses heavily on the increased proliferation of technology leading up to 2011 which made social media platforms increasingly available to the Egyptian people (Alqudsi-ghabra, 2012, p. 151; Chebib & Sohail, 2011; Gerbaudo, 2012; Herrera, 2014; Howard & Hussain, 2011, p. 42; Khamis & Vaughn, 2011; Lynch, 2011, p. 303; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012, p. 366). According to the World Bank (2014), the percentage of Egyptians with Internet access grew from far less than 1% in 2000 to 39.8% in 2011. Howard and Hussain (2011, p. 42) note that, after 2000, “reading foreign news online and communicating with friends and relatives abroad became habits,” which could imply that Egyptians became more acutely aware of possibilities for alternative forms of governance. Meanwhile, the number of blogs in Egypt skyrocketed from just 40 in 2004 to 160,000 in 2008, perhaps inculcating a greater appreciation of self-expression (Alqudsi-ghabra, 2012, p. 151).

However, researchers also note a variety of limitations of the use of social media in the revolution. The most influential critique of the idea that social media can beget change was authored prior to the Arab Spring by Gladwell for *The New Yorker*. Gladwell (2010) draws a distinction between the weak actions that he says social media users engage in online and the physical protests undertaken at the lunch counters of Greensboro during the civil rights movement of the 1960s in the United States, during which participants risked their lives. Morozov (2009) likewise argues that social media is

used for “slacktivism,” which he describes as “feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact. It gives those who participate in ‘slacktivist’ campaigns an illusion of having a meaningful impact on the world without demanding anything more than joining a Facebook group.” Furthermore, Gladwell (2010) argues,

Facebook and the like are tools for building *networks*, which are the opposite, in structure and character, of hierarchies. Unlike hierarchies, with their rules and procedures, networks aren’t controlled by a single central authority . . . But if you’re taking on a powerful and organized establishment you have to be a hierarchy.

Additionally, Youmans and York (2012, pp. 317-318) note that platforms such as Facebook are motivated by commercial considerations and were not designed for the purpose of activism, often creating difficulties for activists; for example, the creator of the “We Are All Khaled Said” page on Facebook, Wael Ghonim, used a pseudonym when he created the page in order to protect his physical security, causing Facebook to deactivate his account for violating its policy which requires users to reveal their real names. (The page was later re-launched.) Furthermore, social media can also be used by states to monitor and oppress citizens (Morozov, 2011, p. 46). Lynch (2011) notes that “during the years following the failed Facebook protests of the late 2000s, the punchline of a widely circulated grim joke had then-Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak congratulating his intelligence chief Omar Suleiman on Facebook, his greatest invention” (p. 306). After activists used social media to organize a strike in 2008 as part of the April 6 Youth Movement, under administrative decision 765, the Egyptian Ministry of the Interior actually established a “State Security Investigation Police for Facebook” (Alqudsi-ghabra, 2012, p. 151).

Furthermore, Suarez (2011) notes that while social media was successful in driving people to mobilize, individuals are likely to do so “under very specific circumstances and during short periods of time” (p. 31). She notes that

in the heat of a revolt, the young may feel empowered to topple an oppressive regime, but once the hard work of turning revolution into functioning democracy begins, their inclination to participate declines . . . User generated content and social sites facilitate the distribution of information to and from “friends” and potential young voters, but this information moves very rapidly and is not conducive to deliberation.

The political turmoil that Egypt has endured following the revolution suggests that Suarez is correct that social media may be able to help foment a revolution, but it is not an instrument of governance, leaving what follows in its wake highly questionable. This study will probe the role of a particular Facebook page in contributing to the Egyptian revolution.

## We Are All Khaled Said

In June 2010, Ghonim, a 30-year-old Google executive and online activist for Egyptian opposition figure Mohamed ElBaradei, created an Arabic Facebook page called “We Are All Khaled Said” in order to protest the death of a 28-year-old Egyptian citizen whose death he learned of on the social network. In his memoir, *Revolution 2.0*, Ghonim describes viewing a photograph of Said’s corpse which a friend—Dr. Ayman Nour, a political activist and former presidential candidate—had posted on Facebook. In Ghonim’s (2012) words,

it was a horrifying photo showing the distorted face of a man in his twenties. There was a big pool of blood behind his head, which rested on a chunk of marble. His face was extremely disfigured and bloodied; his lower lip had been ripped in half, and his jaw was seemingly dislocated. His front teeth appeared to be missing, and it looked as if they had been beaten right out of his mouth. The image was so gruesome that I wondered if he had been wounded in war. But by accessing Dr. Nour’s page I learned that Khaled Mohamed Said had apparently been beaten to death on June 6 by two secret police officers in Alexandria. (p. 58)

Later, Said’s mother suggested that her son was killed because he possessed a video on his mobile phone which showed local police officers dividing drugs and money for their personal possession. The Egyptian Ministry of the Interior, by contrast, claimed that Said had died of asphyxiation after swallowing an entire package of marijuana—which none of the three direct eyewitnesses reported observing. The ministry claimed that Said was wanted for dealing drugs, possessing a weapon, sexual harassment, and evading his military service. His mother later countered the final charge by producing a certificate of Said’s completion of compulsory military service (Ghonim, 2012, pp. 64-66).

For Ghonim, Said’s death was emblematic of the brutality and impunity of Egyptian security forces—which ordinary Egyptians were enduring every day. He therefore created the Facebook page “We Are All Khaled Said” to protest Egyptian police torture and financial corruption. The page would later become an epicenter of activity during the anti-Mubarak protests of January–February 2011. After Ghonim (the “page owner”) was imprisoned by State security forces on 27 January 2011, the page was updated by his activist friends.

## Research Design

This study used discourse analysis to critically evaluate all postings by the page owner remaining on the Facebook Arabic page “We Are All Khaled Said” at the time of study that were posted between and including 1 January 2011—25 days before the street protests began—and 11 February 2011, when it was announced that President Mubarak would step down. Additionally, the project analyzed all 17 postings

from this time period which are included and translated into English in Ghonim's (2012) book, *Revolution 2.0*, because his book included some posts which were no longer visible on the Facebook page at the time of study. While the page was created in 2010, this time period was selected in order to home in on the specific role that the page played in catalyzing and sustaining the street demonstrations of 25 January to 11 February 2011. As Pierson (2003, p. 2) argues, understanding the sequence of events preceding a phenomena and how these events developed is critical to adequately understanding and explaining the phenomena.

Each posting by the page's owner typically elicited thousands of responses from other Facebook users. In order to evaluate the nature of these comments, this study selected one of the page owner's postings and analyzed the responses which other Facebook users posted to it. This is Ghonim's posting of 14 January 2011: "Today is the 14th . . . January 25 is Police Day and it's a national holiday . . . If 100,000 take to the streets, no one can stop us . . . I wonder if we can??" Although the April 6 Youth Movement was the first to call for protests to take place on 25 January 2011, the Movement's leadership worked closely with Ghonim to promote the event online (Lim, 2012, p. 242). On 25 January, the Egyptian people indeed took to the streets, initiating 18 days of protests which culminated in the resignation of their President. This posting is therefore most likely to illustrate the ways in which the interactions between the page owner and his followers contributed concretely to the revolution.

The responses of the last 100 individuals who responded to this posting as of the time of analysis were selected for study. The older postings were utilized because they are more likely than earlier postings to be reflective of the debate occurring on the page in reaction to both the posting by the page owner and previous responses to his posting by other users. In order to eliminate the over-representation of single individuals, in instances in which the same person responded more than once to the posting, the person's last response was evaluated and their earlier responses were discarded so that the sample included comments from 100 different individuals. This sample size was selected for analysis because it allowed for a more detailed, intensive analysis of content than would be possible if the entire page were aggregated.

Finally, Ghonim's (2012) memoir, *Revolution 2.0*, was used to gain insight into his intended strategies and the rationale behind his postings, as well as an account of the creation of the Facebook page which falls outside of the timeframe of the postings evaluated but is critical to understanding the page's evolution. All of the posts selected for analysis were compiled manually.

## Results

### Content

In evaluating the postings by the page owner, particularly striking are the remarkably substantive grievances he posts

about life under the Mubarak regime and the specificity of his demands, which in aggregate cohere into a full-fledged political agenda. Contrary to the claims of critics such as Gladwell (2010) that social media offers a forum for only short and superficial exchanges, the page owner's postings are remarkable for their coherent, sophisticated arguments.

The arguments made by the page owner are highly substantive, listing detailed grievances which focus heavily on poverty and police torture and graft and to a lesser degree on the disingenuousness of Egyptian state media. Many of the page owner's complaints are extremely detailed; he objects, for example, to the high cost of supplementary education lessons for which Egyptian parents feel the need to pay. Postings on the page include actual statistics on the rates of poverty, depression, suicide, unemployment, newborn deaths, anemia, Hepatitis C, cancer due to water pollution, and income disparity among Egyptian citizens, as well as the country's ranking on the Corruption Perceptions Index and ratio of ambulance cars to citizens.

Furthermore, the page diagnoses causal factors—arguing, for example, that police corruption has been caused by poverty—and prescribes broad remedies, such as the need for collective solutions to individual problems and for a focus on commonalities in order to eliminate classism and religious hatred. The page owner advances solutions which are likewise thoughtful and specific, with proposals such as increasing education budgets and revising pedagogy in schools.

The postings are not only substantive but also coherent. In fact, the page owner develops a political platform, listing four demands for the Mubarak regime—addressing poverty, ending emergency law, firing the country's Interior Minister, and instituting term limits on the presidency—and offers eight guidelines for protesting, in order to ensure safety and promote efficacy. In other words, the page resembles the communications of a full-fledged political organization or movement, yet lacks an offline structure or membership. Prior to the creation of the Facebook page, it did not exist.

This finding suggests that social media postings can actually be remarkably sophisticated. In reality, it is unlikely that an ordinary citizen participating in protests—not just in Egypt but in any nation—is likely to seek information beyond the level of depth offered by statistics such as the ratio of ambulances to citizens. The page owner's postings successfully marshal evidence in support of a coherent ideology and set of demands remarkable for their thoughtfulness and consistency.

### Language

The page owner's language is characterized by a colloquial nature and exhortations to the Egyptian people insisting that they can be agents of change.

In his memoir, Ghonim (2012, p. 61) notes that he chose to write in a common Egyptian dialect rather than in classical Arabic on the page. He reports,

I also deliberately avoided expressions that were not commonly used by the average Egyptian or that were regularly used by activists, like *nizaam*, the Arabic word for “regime.” I was keen to convey to page members the sense that I was one of them, that I was not different in any way. Using the pronoun I was critical to establishing the fact that the page was not managed by an organization, political party, or movement of any kind. On the contrary, the writer was an ordinary Egyptian devastated by the brutality inflicted on Khaled Said.

By way of example, at one point, the page owner addresses “ultras” (extreme soccer fans), utilizing a reference which unites the Egyptian people through sport. Another instructive example is his posting which reads,

I apologize for posting pictures of torture cases, but I swear that I had not seen most of them before. It seems I lived on another planet . . . A planet where I went to work in the morning and watched soccer games and sat at cafes with friends at night. . . (Ghonim, 2012, p. 64)

A different Facebook page already existing when Ghonim created “We Are All Khaled Said” provides a useful frame of reference. The other page, entitled “My Name is Khaled Mohamed Said,” was headlined “Khaled’s murder will not go unpunished, you dogs of the regime.” Ghonim (2012) reports in his memoir, “I knew that such language would not help in making the cause a mainstream one” (p. 59). By contrast, Ghonim says, his page “spoke the language of the Internet generation. The tone on the page was always decent and nonconfrontational.”

Yet, an analysis of the content reveals that the postings, while nonconfrontational, are deeply action-oriented. They are clearly crafted to inspire followers to believe that, despite decades of Mubarak rule, things can in fact change; convince them that individual action can be meaningful; and exhort them to get involved. A posting insisting that people who had taken action were “the greatest people in the world” is typical of the degree of insistence and even hyperbole the page owner employs in describing the role of the individual: “I swear to God you are all heroes . . . I swear to God you are the greatest people in the world . . . I swear to God you have honored Egypt” (Ghonim, 2012, pp. 274-275).

Another typical posting reads, “if we all act, no one can stop us. And believe me, the army will take our side if we strategize correctly”—demonstrating the great (and ultimately accurate) optimism of the postings and the certainty in his claim that the people would be victorious. An additional posting utilizing this same tactic in reverse notes that some people in Tunisia probably did not believe that their revolution would be successful, and now they are “ashamed.”

The language of the postings thus reveals both a desire to connect with ordinary Egyptians and powerful rhetoric designed to catalyze action by convincing Egyptians of the potential impact of the individual, in a nation where dissent

against a deeply entrenched regime was perilous and could too easily appear to be futile.

## Responses

While the page owner’s postings are remarkable for their substance, the responses posted by his followers are, in the sample studied, remarkable for their lack thereof. Ghonim’s postings are notable for their detailed grievances and ideas for action. By contrast, those of his followers analyzed in this study are typified by rather empty expressions of support for the revolution which, while enthusiastic, lack theoretical, evidence-based, or experience-based justifications or original proposals.

The most common response to the page owner’s 14 January posting is a response calling for the end of the regime. Nagwa Soliman’s response, which includes the line “down, down, military rule,” and Mohamed Abdelmagued’s response, “down with the military junta,” are illustrative of the typical response to the posting, regularly repeated practically verbatim. Responders most commonly demand an end to military, army, or junta rule, most often using the word “down.” Mostafa Mahmoud’s response, which calls for the end of “killers,” “hypocrisy,” “false witness,” and “hypocrisy,” is remarkable among this genre of comments for the specificity of the allegations, notwithstanding their vagueness and lack of further elaboration. Such postings more typically call for an end to the regime without allegations or further explanation.

Also common are responses praising martyrs (Kaled Kalil Elseniny’s post “Glory all glory to . . . martyrs” is representative), expressing hope (such as Dr. Ali Mohammed Ali’s response “The dream does not end . . .”), making conspiratorial allegations (such as that President Mubarak is an Israeli agent), praising or calling on Allah for help (Salma Soly’s response, “God willing we all complete our revolution” is typical), or expressing optimism (such as Manal Mnola’s post that “the great revolution and God will continue”). Virtually all of the 100 responses studied fall into these categories.

The responses examined contain no evidence of strategizing on tactics to create a successful mobilization. The closest resemblance to logistical organizing in the responses studied is that of Hisham Adel, who asks whether there will be any demands when the people march. No solutions are put forth. The closest resemblance to forward thinking or practical politics is a lone, anomalous post by Mahmoud Anwar, calling for “Wael Ghonim as President.”

These responses to Ghonim’s posting thus resemble more of a chorus in support of the page owner’s idea than the use of a platform for sharing criticism of the Mubarak regime or organizing protests against it. This suggests the kind of top-down organizing which Gladwell (2010) proclaims is impossible on social media sites. The responses do not suggest a collaboration between the page owner and his followers, but

rather a leader (the page owner) making a proposal and his followers firing back their messages of agreement, hope, and support.

### *Leadership Style*

The leadership style of Ghonim becomes fully evident only when the longer timeframe provided by the evidence in Ghonim's book is considered. Ghonim's book makes clear that while the page initially focused on the death of Said and the broader issue of police brutality, it was radicalized by the revolution that occurred in Tunisia. Ghonim (2012) writes that prior to this time, "mention of Mubarak had been off-limits on the page. But as soon as Ben Ali fled Tunisia, this was no longer the case" (p. 142). His first posting directly attacking the Mubarak regime consisted of a picture of Mubarak and former Tunisian President Ben Ali, with the posting "you have led and we shall follow" (Ghonim, 2012, p. 141).

It is clear from this longer time horizon that the page began with a less radical approach, which would have been less threatening to Egypt's non-activist community, and gradually went on to encourage its members to engage in more direct activism targeting the Mubarak government. In fact, the page initially eschewed street activism because Ghonim saw that a protest recently organized by other activists had resulted in a low turnout. As a result, he says, "we chose instead to identify online activities that we could promote, to instill a sense of optimism and confidence that we could make a difference, even if only in the virtual world for the time being" (Ghonim, 2012, p. 67). Such activities included inviting members to change their Facebook profile pictures to an image of Said against the Egyptian flag and to photograph themselves holding a sign reading "We Are All Khaled Said" in Arabic.

Eventually, the movement moved to the streets in a form calculated to be non-threatening to the Egyptian government. The page's followers were encouraged to participate in "Silent Stands" in which they wore black and stood together in public places to express their disapproval of the handling of the Said case and police brutality more generally (Ghonim, 2012, p. 70). However, such activities did not involve demands or even, as the name of the event indicates, language to express the grievances of the participants.

This account suggests that the page owner slowly worked to change the views and norms of his followers and to gradually help them become comfortable with greater levels of political dissent. His leadership style was that of a long-term trainer or coach. It was also deeply strategic, hierarchical, and paternalistic, as he methodically exposed and acclimated his followers to increasing levels of activism. Ghonim (2012) notes that "the fact that the regime had not retaliated in any way also made it easier for many people to participate. The barriers of fear were slowly being torn down" (p. 69). As the evaluation of the page's language indicates, Ghonim's exhortations to his followers helped to counter their pessimism and

resignation to decades of Mubarak rule and to impart the belief that they could be meaningful agents of change.

The external event of the Tunisian revolution was clearly a tipping point on the page, as it helped provide a frame of reference to offer up as proof of the possibility of regime change and to legitimize direct attacks on the Mubarak regime. By 14 January, less than a month after Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation sparked the Tunisian protests, Ghonim was accurately assessing the political opportunity in his environment and leading his followers to mobilize in the streets against the Mubarak regime.

### *Impact*

Of course, it is impossible to know whether the Egyptian revolution would have happened in the absence of this Facebook page. It is clear that many of the same pressures which drove the Tunisian revolution—including political repression, youth unemployment, poverty, income inequality, media censorship, police brutality, as well as the symbolic event of a high-profile youth death at the hands of police—were present in Egypt. The revolution did not and could not have happened in a vacuum. This is why, in discussing triggers, Pierson (2004) notes the need to carefully consider "a gradual buildup of stress, as well as . . . the possibility that short-term processes are adequate to generate such flash points" (p. 185).

However, Ghonim was among the key promoters of the protests beginning on 25 January (Lim, 2012, p. 24). It therefore seems quite likely that he made a contribution to the revolution through this thought leadership. At the same time, what toppled the Mubarak regime was the anger and bravery of the citizens who mobilized on the streets. The revolution was ultimately achieved in the actual—not the virtual—world.

Furthermore, Ghonim himself relied not just upon social media but also upon traditional organizing tactics, such as sending out press releases about upcoming mobilizations and organizing physical demonstrations. Thus, at best, this Facebook page played a catalytic role in the revolution by not just sharing the proposal that Egyptians mobilize on 25 January, but also, as the evolution of the page suggests, helping to radicalize followers and legitimize dissent through the evolution of the page from a forum for citizens concerned about police brutality—or perhaps simply curious about Said's high-profile death—to a page actively fomenting anger against the Mubarak regime and concomitant action on the streets.

### **Discussion**

The findings call into serious question Gladwell's (2010) description of online social activism as shallow. In fact, Ghonim shared remarkably substantive information and sophisticated demands online. Furthermore, the results suggest that the characterization by Gladwell (2010) as well as

by social media optimists such as Shirky (2008, p. 21) and Mason (2012, p. 81) of social movements as being fomented through non-hierarchical, network-based relationships on social media are, in this case, incorrect. The responses evaluated make clear that Ghonim clearly played the role of long-term trainer and eventually an instigator of the revolution, while his online interlocutors acted as supporters rather than strategists, suggesting that their relationship was hierarchical rather than horizontal. While other movements on social media may be horizontal, this one clearly was not.

The evidence suggests a number of lessons for other online activists. First, the cognitive science literature indicates that human beings respond powerfully to personal stories (Slovic, 2007). Said's heartbreaking story appears to have been a powerful way of bringing Egyptian citizens together initially around a shared cause, helping to build a following for Ghonim's Facebook page.

Additionally, this study identifies a leadership style used by Ghonim that has not been previously discussed in the literature: that of a long-term trainer or coach. Ghonim appears to have gradually trained his followers to be comfortable with deeper levels of dissent so that when the political conditions became ripe for a revolution, he had a group of followers who were intellectually prepared to take action. Lim (2012, p. 238) notes that the Kefaya movement had likewise been helping its followers become more comfortable with political activity since 2004. Kingdon (1995) argues that, in the United States, policy change never occurs unless entrepreneurs first invest in "softening up" the public over an extended period of time, by educating citizens about their cause and gradually bringing them around to support it, so that when a short-term opportunity in the environment—or triggering event—occurs, the people will be prepared for change. Kingdon (1995) argues that "without the preliminary work, a proposal sprung even at a propitious time is likely to fall on deaf ears" (p. 128).

A unique property of social media that likely aided in the initial process of "softening" the followers of "We Are All Khaled Said" is the possibility of anonymity. In contrast to being present at a physical demonstration, in Egypt individuals could browse social media posts online while maintaining anonymity and thus avoid possible government reprisals. Although against Facebook policy, in reality, individuals could also engage in discussions on the page using aliases. Eventually, as they saw others engaging in discussions on the page with impunity, more Egyptians likely felt comfortable doing so. The growing popularity of this page as well as of other social media platforms which opposed the Mubarak regime likely helped contribute to an "information cascade"; the Egyptian people eventually realized that if they protested in the streets, others would do so, as well. Social media likely provided a less threatening environment than physical spaces for individuals to take the initial leaps that were necessary to trigger the cascade.

The findings also suggest that Kingdon's concept of the need for triggering events in order to change policy in the United States is likewise applicable elsewhere. Initially, Ghonim's Facebook page seemed unlikely to ignite a revolution; in fact, in his book, Ghonim himself admits that prior to the events in Tunisia, "my own enthusiasm was beginning to fade" (Ghonim, 2012, p. 113). The events abroad acted as the trigger that enabled him to intensify the rhetoric and radicalism of his page. This suggests that it is not enough for an online activist's idea to be powerful; its time must also have come. A thoroughly refined political radar thus appears critical to gauging the opportunities present in a given environment.

The rhetoric that Ghonim used also suggests the importance of invoking optimism and convincing the people of their own power. Cognitive scientists have found that people are more likely to take action on an issue if they believe that their behavior will make an appreciable difference (Small, Loewenstein, & Slovic, 2007, p. 144).

Additional external events also contributed to the success of the protests. For example, unlike the Syrian regime, Egyptian forces largely held their fire against the people—which, as previous scholars have noted, was likely due to the ability of Egyptians to use social media to document events on the ground (Howard & Hussain, 2011, pp. 43-44). Furthermore, the reason why the Egyptian people ultimately took to the streets was not only because Ghonim encouraged them to do so; it was because the Mubarak regime had given them cause for serious grievances.

Of course, a methodological challenge is the fact that the Facebook page remains a living communication vehicle, constantly changing as the result of new postings by the page owner and followers, whose identities may or may not be what they claim to be online. Ghonim (2012, p. 190) reports, for example, that when he received reports of police arresting Egyptians who had indicated on Facebook that they would attend the 25 January protests, he deleted the invitation. Thus, the postings currently visible on the page from January to February 2011 do not exactly resemble how the page looked at that time. Furthermore, additional studies analyzing a broader array of responses to Ghonim's posts would broaden our understanding of the dynamics of Ghonim's interactions with his followers. Nevertheless, this study shines important light on the page owner's leadership style and tactics which helped ignite the revolution.

## Conclusion

This case study provides significantly greater nuance to our understanding of exactly *how* social media was utilized to promote the protests that led to the overthrow of the Mubarak regime. It is clear that Ghonim worked over a period of time to educate Egyptians about the misdeeds and failures of their government and to gradually help citizens become

acclimated to greater levels of activism. He capitalized on a particularly powerful story—that of Khaled Said’s brutal death—but ultimately struck when the political moment was right to call on the Egyptian people to take to the streets by proclaiming that they *could* make a difference.

This study suggests three key lessons for how political activists can foment social change: First, members of a public should be “softened”—or gradually brought along to be comfortable with new ideas and actions. Second, activists should have a keen political radar for “triggering events” upon which they can capitalize. Powerful stories, such as the killing of Khaled Said, are particularly effective, although ultimately the trigger that brought Egyptians into the streets was the overthrow of Tunisia’s leader. Third, messaging should convince citizens that it is possible for them to make an appreciable difference.

However, while the case study suggests that these strategies led to the success of the “We Are All Khaled Said” page in helping foment the revolution, it is also clear that they were not in and of themselves sufficient. For example, if the Mubarak regime had chosen to crack down on protesters violently, as in Syria, this story might have had a dramatically different ending.

The case study also suggests that social media is a more potent vehicle for promoting substantive change than has been fully appreciated. The content of Ghonim’s posts is remarkable for the substance and sophistication of the facts and arguments he conveyed online. Furthermore, this case study demonstrates that, contrary to the claims of scholars on both sides of the debate about whether social media can change the world (Gladwell, 2010; Mason, 2012; Shirky, 2008), social media is at least sometimes a hierarchical platform. In the case of this Facebook Arabic page, it is evident that power and strategy were not decentralized across a network. Rather, Ghonim was a clear coach and leader and, in the posts analyzed, many of his followers simply responded with support. To Gladwell, who claims that Facebook is a tool useful for helping “Wall Streeters,” this study replies that it is also a tool that can help ordinary citizens topple dictators.

Viva *this* revolución.

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