# Chapter 10
# Facilitating the Egyptian Uprising:
## A Case Study of Facebook and Egypt's April 6th Youth Movement

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*It has been suggested that social media offers important organizing tools for activists in countries where free expression is curtailed and news outlets are handcuffed by government censorship. The 2011 revolution in Egypt offers an opportunity to examine the extent to which social media fulfills the role that free journalism plays in more democratic societies. By analyzing messages posted in Arabic by activists from one of the largest Egyptian opposition groups, this study attempts to see what role Facebook played in the revolution. This chapter aims to fill a gap in scholarly understanding of the event while simultaneously contributing to the understanding of the importance of social media tools for activists and organizers. The results show that the organizers used Facebook largely to communicate a mixture of expressions of national pride, news events, and calls for mobilization on the ground to support their revolutionary efforts.*

## INTRODUCTION

It has been suggested that social media provide important organizing tools for activists in countries where free expression is curtailed and news outlets are handcuffed by government censorship. With technological gizmos, activists can bypass gatekeepers at news media organizations that are handcuffed by repressitarian governments (Bowe & Blom, 2010).

Despite general assertions that government controls are ineffective, threaten cultural differences, and hamper technological advances (Rodriguez & Spanik, 2003), Egypt has a long history of exerting repressive control over the Internet. In 2003, Egypt became the first state in the world to charge and imprison a blogger (Diebert & Rohozinski, 2008). The Committee to Protect Journalists (2009) placed Egypt at No. 10 on its list of the worst countries to be a blogger, citing government surveillance and open-ended detention of bloggers.

The continuous human rights violations inspired a variety of groups to stand up against the regime, such as Coptic Christians, feminists, Islamist-oriented intellectuals, university students, and labor activists (Blaydes, 2011). However, it was not until early 2011 when this coalition was able to unite a critical mass of protestors to take over main squares in Cairo and other prominent cities, which ultimately led to the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak. One way to understand and gauge the success of those mobilizing efforts is by examining what messages dissidents distributed among their online social networks.

The 2011 revolution in Egypt offers an opportunity to investigate the extent to which social media tools fulfill the role that journalism plays in more transparent societies, as some media coverage attributed a central role in the uprising to social media such as Facebook and Twitter. Those social media platforms were identified as among the most important protest tools available to Egyptians (Morillon & Julliard, 2010). For example, one *New York Times* reporter wrote that "the same Web tools that so many Americans use to keep up with college pals and post passing thoughts have a more noble role as well, as a scourge of despotism" (Shane, 2011, para. 3). Similarly, a *New Yorker* writer asserted that "Facebook and Twitter have undoubtedly accelerated the protests by spreading news that would otherwise have taken a long time to spread, by quickly connecting people who aren't generally able to connect in authoritarian countries, and by inflaming passions" (Thompson, 2011, para. 2).

One of the main opposition groups in the Egyptian uprising was the 6th of April Youth Movement. This movement, founded in 2008, has been noticed in part because of its ability to organize effectively via Facebook in the face of the government repression of such organizing, attracting some 70,000 group members in the run-up to a demonstration (Reese, 2009). The success of this Facebook group elevated the

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