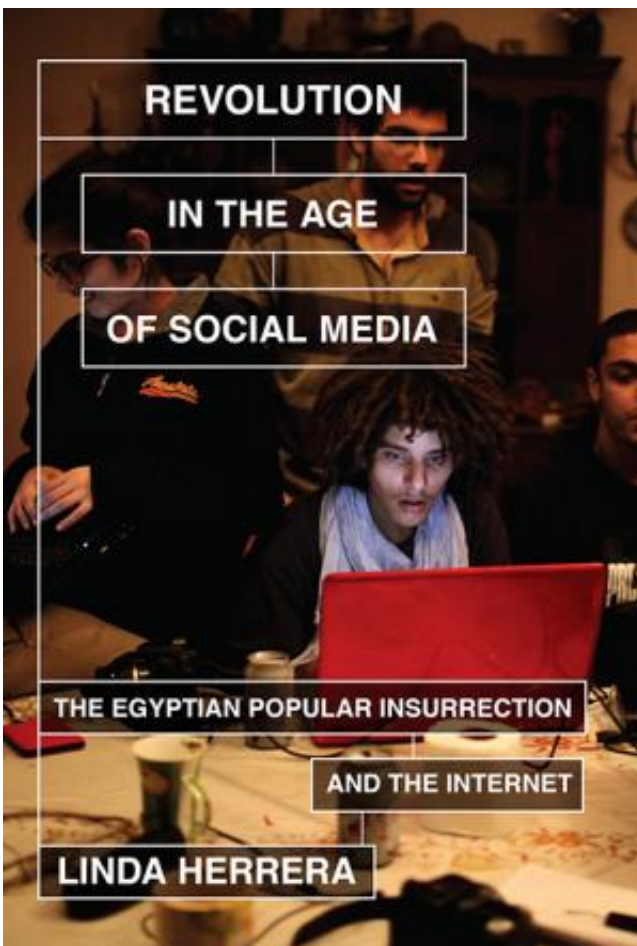


Power struggles, doubt all found in the Facebook of Egypt's revolution

September 18 2014, by Craig Chamberlain



“Revolution in the Age of Social Media: The Egyptian Popular Insurrection and the Internet” is published by Verso.

Egypt's 2011 revolution, described at the time as a "Facebook

revolution," made Linda Herrera a big believer in the power of social media. A past resident of Cairo who had studied the online culture of Egyptian youth and followed events through their Facebook pages, the University of Illinois education professor became, for a moment in time, a "complete cyber-optimist."

She decided to document what had happened online in the lead up to the [revolution](#) and after.

The result is "Revolution in the Age of Social Media: The Egyptian Popular Insurrection and the Internet" (Verso), published in May.

Herrera's book, however, is more intrigue than optimism, a complex tale that took time to unravel, she said. In the hands of a novelist, she said, her book could have been a political thriller.

Her cast of characters includes virtual freedom fighters, infiltrators, videogame enthusiasts and Internet trolls, as well as figures from the U.S. State Department, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Egyptian military and Google.

As for the seemingly spontaneous, youth-led "Facebook revolution," it was "not quite the romantic tale of liberation that many had initially supposed it to be," she said. And things were much more complicated than they originally seemed.

For example, the key "We Are All Khaled Said" Facebook page, credited with calling for the first large-scale demonstration on Jan. 25, 2011, was managed by administrators well-versed in product marketing and "cyberdissident" techniques, Herrera said. These methods had been promoted by U.S.-funded nongovernmental organizations, among others.

In another example, several popular "nonpartisan" online news and youth

sites were actually run by the well-organized opposition Muslim Brotherhood.

The same virtual spaces that brought together youthful activists and sparked genuine political debate were also places of struggle between powerful forces, seeking to influence hearts and minds, Herrera said. Some individuals got caught in the middle, and some tragically lost their lives.

Even as she notes the influence of larger forces, Herrera is not promoting any conspiracy theories related to the revolution. "I'm pretty categorical about that," she said.

Instead, one of her concerns is with the youth and the way they were enlisted in pro-democracy and civil society training, not only by the U.S. government, but by technology companies and a range of nongovernmental organizations.

"I wanted to raise some ethical questions about the way that the U.S. State Department, Muslim Brotherhood, high-tech companies and the Egyptian military – all representing big money and power – are operating in this age of new media," Herrera said.

Individuals who take part in trainings through such powerful organizations are vulnerable, especially in police states, Herrera said. "The differentials of power (between the organizations and individual youth) are highly lopsided, and these relationships put young people at risk in ways they don't really understand."

Even while questioning methods advocated by U.S. organizations and noting the evidence of American training, Herrera discounts any real American control over the "We Are All Khaled Said" Facebook page. She can assert this with some confidence because part of her research

involved poring over 1,400 pages of activity there.

"The page started out as a so-called nonpolitical campaign against torture with the aim of revoking emergency laws, using cybertraining techniques. It started out as a page that was looking to reform the state from within, not to overturn it," Herrera said.

"But there was something very spontaneous that happened on the page that led to this call for revolution in Egypt, coming on the heels of the Tunisian revolution. There was something spontaneous and exciting and innovative and creative happening there that was far outside of – and much more interesting than – what people had learned in cybermanuals," she said.

Herrera also observed that the Facebook platform allowed for free expression by many who would normally have been marginalized in public spaces, such as adolescent girls and young women, Christians, and those with disabilities.

But she also observed in those discussions the weakness of [social media](#) in building real political change. For one thing, the speed of exchange there doesn't allow for ideas to mature, she said. "To talk about deep things, or for deep change, it's not the right platform."

A Facebook page also could not build a political movement, Herrera said. "People experienced this freedom of expression, but without really organizing a movement, and that's the problem still today."

"But that doesn't mean it wasn't an important moment, to participate in this space and feel the freedom to express your views."

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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