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**Cyber Dissidents:
The Potentials and Limitations of Using
Social Media for Political Activism**

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Abstract

The phenomenon of the “cyber dissident” is a relatively new concept brought about through the modern age of technology. The Arab Spring in 2011 brought this concept to the forefront and social media began to be seen as a tool for protest and even mobilization against oppressive state power. This article examines how citizens use social media such as Twitter and Facebook to dissent against their authoritarian regimes. It will also examine how these governments use censorship to counter online political activism. Ai Weiwei in China and Ahmed Maher in Egypt provide two case studies that demonstrate the complex power relations between cyber dissidents and their respective governments. How did Ahmed Maher during the April 6th Movement and Ai Weiwei in the wake of the Sichuan earthquake controversy in 2008 use social media to challenge the regimes in Egypt and China?

Keywords: cyber dissidents, social media, censorship, political movements, collective action

I. Introduction

In 2008, both the Chinese and Egyptian government drew intense scrutiny from activists as events in their countries led to public outcry. On May 12, 2008, China experienced a horrible earthquake in the Sichuan province that left thousands of people dead. The Chinese government tried to cover up the details of the casualties, especially the death toll of the children who died in poorly constructed schools. This angered many Chinese citizens and spurred them into action launching a Citizens Investigation soon after. Ai Weiwei rose up as one of the most prominent activist in this endeavor and began using Twitter as a way to disseminate information he uncovered regarding the victims. On April 6, 2008, Egypt experienced one of the most impressive displays of collective action as many joined textile workers from the town, El-Mahalla el-Kubra, to protest against poor wages and rising food prices. Ahmed Maher, one of the founders of the April 6th Movement had initiated a Facebook group to inform others about the planned protest and was amazed when the group grew to over 70,000 members in a few short weeks.

These two leaders provide the perfect case studies for how cyber dissidents can use social media to help further their political goals. I will argue that social media is an important tool for dissent since it can be useful in informing and mobilizing publics about activists' causes. However, activists must be aware of the strict internet controls authoritarian governments impose to closely monitor their citizens. Censorship becomes one of the biggest impediments to these activists, which leads to what is often termed as "internet cat and mouse games." Wherein, the virtual space becomes a hot area of contestation between activists and state security officials. This virtual space allows for the freedom of expression as activists can air their grievances online while simultaneously propelling governments to find ways to curb internet freedom. Eventually, this all leads to the creation of counter measures by activists to avoid censorship and thus a cycle is created between activists and governments. This article begins with a discussion on cyberactivism and the role social media plays in advancing collective action. Then, it will proceed to discuss how these two dissident leaders utilize social media through their activism as well as analyze social media's potentials and limitations in this process.

II. Literature Review

I will be discussing the utility of social media in terms of its ability to create a virtual common space for the public to exchange information and ideas as well as the nature of social networks and how this does or does not contribute to successful mobilization from online to offline action. Studying social media and the internet in regards to its use by political activists is crucial to understanding how it is used to challenge authoritarian regimes.

By looking at cyberactivism, scholars have come to realize the internet's utility in creating a virtual gathering space. The internet, but more specifically social media, is seen as

more than just a simple communicative tool, but the platform by which individuals can come together to exchange ideas and information, dialogue, and mobilize. Babak Rahimi states, “in a societal sense, cyberspace can also be viewed as a distinct sphere of virtual public wherein new discourses, activities, and, moreover interventions of an older media, take part in the formation of new public opinions.”¹ Rahimi argues even further that the internet is not only a virtual space of assembly but also a space of contestation where the “virtualization of citizen empowerment and virtualization of state power that cyberspace, as a social networking force, presents an agonistic space of interaction.”² So while the internet can help establish and connect communities of cyber dissidents, government authorities can just as easily use these spaces to control and curb cyberactivism, which will be discussed further on in this article.

While the internet, such as social networking sites, may be looked upon as a contested space of interaction, it has also been noted as an online forum for free speech. Sahar Khamis and Katherine Vaughn look at how social media tools, especially Facebook, are used by activists to mobilize and encourage political change.³ In regards to the Egyptian Revolution, they argue that:

Facebook pages, such as ‘We Are All Khaled Said,’ can act as effective tools for supporting the capabilities of the democratic activists by allowing forums for free speech and political networking opportunities; providing a virtual space for

¹ Babak Rahimi, “The Agonistic Social Media: Cyberspace in the formation of dissent and consolidation of state power in Post-election Iran,” *The Communication Review* 14, no. 3 (September 9, 2011): p. 161.

² Ibid. p. 173.

³ Katherine Vaughn and Sahar Khamis, “‘We Are All Khaled Said’: The potentials and limitations of cyberactivism in triggering public mobilization and promoting political change,” *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research* 4, no. 2 (2011): 145–163.

assembly; supporting the capability of the protestors to plan, organize and execute peaceful protests.⁴

Thus, cyberspace creates the opportunity for online collective action by helping connect these individuals to form critical communities with common beliefs and goals. Suzanne Brunsting and Tom Postmes view online collective action similarly.

The Internet offers people a chance to organize and unite in much more sophisticated and powerful ways than ever before (as is underlined by the effectiveness of mass communication to mobilizing people) and may also accentuate the common identity in an otherwise heterogeneous group.⁵

They view the internet's potential as a platform for collective action, noting its ability to reach across various boundaries and unite individuals.

The transboundary nature of social networking sites is an important factor to its success as well. These transboundary dynamics are seen in a variety of ways. One of the most obvious is through the internet's ability to reach audiences across national borders, extending its communicative capacities to individuals in other regions around the globe. Halim Rane and Sumra Salem analyze social media's impact on various social movements such as those that occurred during the Arab Spring.⁶ They believe that "the advent of social media has enabled actors to communicate directly and constantly across vast geographical distances, which increases the potential for cross-national diffusion between corresponding social movements."⁷

⁴ Ibid. p. 146.

⁵ Suzanne Brunsting and Tom Postmes, "Social movement participation in the digital age: Predicting offline and online collective action," *Small Group Research* 33, no. 5 (October 2002): p. 530.

⁶ Halim Rane and Sumra Salem, "Social media, social movements and the diffusion of ideas in the Arab uprisings," *Journal of International Communication* 18, no. 1 (April 5, 2012): 97–111.

⁷ Ibid. p. 98.

Thus, the highly interactive nature of social media tools has the ability to “dissolve the specificity of locality and territoriality of society in complex ways.”⁸ Guobin Yang argues that China’s Internet-mediated networks engage in similar transboundary interactions.⁹ This is done “across locality (hence translocal), and across territorial boundaries (hence also transnational). These interactions create linkages and enable diffusion of information and ideas... thus enhancing the speed and scope of protest.”¹⁰ Therefore, the key to social media as an effective communicative tool is its capacity to disseminate information quickly to a wide group of individuals across vast geographic spaces. Through these interactions activists should be better equipped to mobilize online collective action. For example, Khamis and Vaughn noted:

Although the administrators of the two pages [‘We Are All Khaled Said’] are independent of each other and claim they do not know one another’s identities, they work in tandem, communicating constantly. Thus, each page can complement and amplify the work of the other and expand its reach across spatial boundaries.¹¹

Not only does the internet enable individuals to breach barriers of geographical distance, but it can also circumvent barriers to “cost, censorship, and to a certain extent, personal accountability.”¹² In regards to censorship, social media offers ordinary citizens a way to challenge mainstream media by giving them the choice to disseminate whatever information is deemed important in whichever way they choose. Thus, by acting as citizen journalists,

⁸ Rahimi, “The Agonistic Social Media: Cyberspace in the formation of dissent and consolidation of state power in Post-election Iran.” p. 162.

⁹ Guobin Yang, “Activists beyond virtual borders: Internet-mediated networks and informational politics in China,” *First Monday* 11, no. 7 (September 4, 2006).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Vaughn and Khamis, “‘We Are All Khaled Said’: The potentials and limitations of cyberactivism in triggering public mobilization and promoting political change.” p. 156.

¹² Brunsting and Postmes, “Social movement participation in the digital age: Predicting offline and online collective action.” p. 526.

individuals can “challenge governmental media censorship and provide an alternative voice to traditional media outlets.”¹³ Especially in regards to those “diverse voices of marginalized status, whose perspectives often remain silent in mainstream media, are expressed and communicated producing distinctive spaces of alternative utterances to realign the dominant public spheres on a global scale.”¹⁴ The trend among activists is that they often come from marginalized groups and view social media as a safe space in which they can air their grievances freely. “The Internet may enable members of less powerful groups to express views that might otherwise be punished or sanctioned by more powerful parties.”¹⁵ Social media and the internet in general allow those of lesser status, “who would be kept at bay due to unacceptability or lack of access opportunities, the chance to take a fuller part in its activities [and] removes restrictions for peripheral members and outsiders.”¹⁶ Thus, it helps restore the power back to the people to take more control in the facilitation of communication and mobilization of online and offline action.

Yet, moving from online to offline collective action becomes a challenge for many of these cyber dissidents. Rahimi explains:

In a theoretical sense, cyberspace involves spheres of strife (protest) and hegemony (power), where in the claims to information, ideals, values, and identities are contested and ruptured...The notion of ‘agonistic’ social media is

¹³ Vaughn and Khamis, “‘We Are All Khaled Said’: The potentials and limitations of cyberactivism in triggering public mobilization and promoting political change.” p. 147.

¹⁴ Rahimi, “The Agonistic Social Media: Cyberspace in the formation of dissent and consolidation of state power in Post-election Iran.” p. 162.

¹⁵ Brunsting and Postmes, “Social movement participation in the digital age: Predicting offline and online collective action.” p. 529.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 532

meant to underline this perpetual confrontation between conflicting forces that bring instability to political order.¹⁷

Social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube can provide new forums to promote or resist state power amidst the backdrop of political movements. For example, “Twitter enables on-the-move coordination and communication [which] has been used for outreach in the international media and diasporic communities. Such widespread and easy access to these online communication tools poses new and threatening challenges to autocratic regimes...and offer new chances to counter their unlimited power.”¹⁸ As Clay Shirky states, “social media have become coordinating tools for nearly all of the world's political movements, just as most of the world's authoritarian governments (and, alarmingly, an increasing number of democratic ones) are trying to limit access to it.”¹⁹ Thus, the power struggle between activists and regimes is becoming more apparent. Simultaneously states are found to exert their authority over online operations through a variety of means such as surveillance, propaganda, and hacktivism.²⁰ Shirky attributes authoritarian government crackdowns on the internet as a way to “stifle communication among their citizens because they fear, correctly, that a better-coordinated populace would constrain their ability to act without oversight.”²¹ This can make it difficult for activists to coordinate online or offline action. Rahimi’s study highlights the dualistic nature of social media, explaining that it has the potential to create either cyber-utopianism or state-dystopianism. In essence, “the agonistic model of politics is ultimately about the impossibility of absolute power, cyberspace, as

¹⁷ Rahimi, “The Agonistic Social Media: Cyberspace in the formation of dissent and consolidation of state power in Post-election Iran.” p. 161

¹⁸ Vaughn and Khamis, “‘We Are All Khaled Said’: The potentials and limitations of cyberactivism in triggering public mobilization and promoting political change.” p. 148

¹⁹ Clay Shirky, “The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change,” *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 1 (January 2011): p. 30.

²⁰ Rahimi, “The Agonistic Social Media: Cyberspace in the formation of dissent and consolidation of state power in Post-election Iran.” p. 158.

²¹ Shirky, “The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change.” p. 32.

distinct social space, presents a wavering space of contentious activities in which political activism is perpetually defined in innovative ways.”²²

Yang also alludes to the agonistic nature between actors in the realm of online political activism, especially in regards to China.²³ “It almost seems as if there existed a symbiotic relationship between control and resistance.”²⁴ He contests that all activities that take place in internet networks occur under an environment of control. Similarly to Rahimi, Yang states “that these activities are taking place at all indicates both the limits of control at the current stage of Internet development and the resistance and creativity of social actors.”²⁵ Thus, scholars draw strong connections between online and offline action and the power plays between cyber dissidents and the state that lead to new and creative ways of thinking about political activism.

While much has been covered on the topics of cyber activism and collective action through social media, little has been written regarding how individual leaders or cyber dissidents fit into the greater context of this collective action. I will examine more closely how they use social media tools such as Twitter and Facebook to advance their long term goals. Although many scholars have commented on social media’s lack of effectiveness in creating direct political change, I want to explore just how much of an influence these individual leaders had in helping facilitate their cause and combating authoritarian regimes through online and offline interactions.

III. Case Studies

²² Rahimi, “The Agonistic Social Media: Cyberspace in the formation of dissent and consolidation of state power in Post-election Iran.” p. 173.

²³ Yang, “Activists beyond virtual borders: Internet-mediated networks and informational politics in China.”

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

Ai Weiwei in China

Ai Weiwei is one of the most well known “netizens” or internet activists in China. Up until recently, he has been microblogging since 2005 through a variety of sites within the firewall as well as externally, through Twitter. “Microblogging itself is an interesting phenomenon in China. Due to the nature of the written Chinese language, a tweet in Chinese is almost a short blog post.”²⁶ This allows him great freedom with his social media activities. He continuously expresses the importance of freedom of expression and internet freedom for all. In the wake of the Sichuan earthquake in 2008, Ai Weiwei’s online activism increased drastically as he strove to uncover the victims of the earthquake, which the Chinese government tried so hard to conceal.

Ai Weiwei’s Twitter Activities

Ai Weiwei uses Twitter for a variety of reasons most notably his social activism. However, he also uses the social media tool as a platform for his art, often fusing art and politics together. In regards to the Sichuan earthquake and his political activism, he uses the hashtag *#512birthday* when he tweets the names of the victims on their birthdays.²⁷ As Jennifer Ng, the editor of *Bird’s Nest: Ai Weiwei in English*, states, “It’s sort of performance art in a way, in that it motivates the Twitterers to participate and do something, even if it’s just a subtle virtual gesture.”²⁸ Through this type of twitter activism, he is able to disseminate the information about

²⁶ Thomas Crampton, “Demographics of China’s Twitter Users,” *Social Media in China and Across Asia*, February 21, 2010, <http://www.thomascrampton.com/china/china-twitter-demographics/>.

²⁷ An Xiao, “Art 2.1 Translating Ai Weiwei: Bringing Chinese Social Media Art to the English Twittersphere, Part 1,” *Art 2.1*, December 2, 2010, <http://blog.art21.org/2010/12/02/art-2-1-translating-ai-weiwei-bringing-chinese-social-media-art-to-the-english-twittersphere-part-1/>.

²⁸ Ibid.

the children who perished in the Sichuan earthquake to a wide array of viewers, over 50,000 followers at the time.²⁹

In “Commemoration” (念), Ai Weiwei takes this virtual information sharing one step further by making it more interactive online. From the list of names generated by the #512birthday tweets, twitterers are asked to post one name of a student who died in the earthquake.³⁰ He uses the interactive space of twitter once again in his “Hundred Tweets Activity” (百推), in which one tweets their hundredth tweet to Ai Weiwei. The hope is that by doing this activity the Great Firewall of China will fall after a hundred pushes, which is a homophone for tweets in Chinese.³¹ In this regard, Ai Weiwei is attempting to combat the Chinese government’s online censorship through his tweets and those of his active participant followers, although this activity may be more symbolic than functional in nature.

In the “Say Your Real Name Activity” (说出你的名字), on June 13, 2010 he asked his followers to simply say their real name.³² However, since Twitter is banned in China, this comes with real repercussions for its tweeting citizens. Thomas Crampton, the Asia-Pacific director of Digital Influence at Ogilvy states:

Chinese generally prefer semi-anonymous platforms like bulletin boards over blogs. This is due both to concerns about the government keeping tabs on who

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

is saying what, but also due to a preference for staying below the radar when making comments.³³

Thus, he was challenging twitterers to stand up against the government by being accountable for their own words online. “Mr. Ai’s stance is that if no one takes responsibility for what they’re saying, then there’s really no one taking a stance against the oppression that is happening.”³⁴ Once one’s name and location is shared on twitter, the government can easily link every tweet back to that user. In response to one of his followers, he tweeted back “Brave you” as a measure of solidarity since “many Chinese twitter users were putting their identities out there for perhaps the first time.”³⁵ The response from Chinese twitterers was so overwhelming that his Twitter account was suspended four times. This was due to his constant retweeting and responding to posts, which exceeded the maximum number one can make in a period of time.³⁶ One Twitter user commented, “Today is definitely a day to commemorate for the Chinese Twitter circle.”³⁷ Jennifer Ng attributes the success of the activity to his status as a leader, especially in the twittersphere, where he has accumulated a large number of followers. “It would have to be someone like him who has that call to power to motivate that many people. For him to have over 50,000 followers, it has a very different impact.”³⁸

³³ Thomas Crampton, “Will China Twitter?,” *Social Media in China and Across Asia*, November 4, 2007, <http://www.thomascrampton.com/media/will-china-twitter/>.

³⁴ Xiao, “Art 2.1 Translating Ai Weiwei: Bringing Chinese Social Media Art to the English Twittersphere, Part 1.”

³⁵ An Xiao, “Anonymous Tweets,” *Bird’s Nest: Ai Weiwei in English (beta)*, June 14, 2010, <http://aiwwenglish.tumblr.com/post/695972431/anonymous-tweets>.

³⁶ Ai Weiwei, *Bird’s Nest: Ai Weiwei in English (beta)*, June 14, 2010, <http://aiwwenglish.tumblr.com/post/695562816/yesterday-because-the-time-limit-exceeded-capacity>.

³⁷ Xiao, “Anonymous Tweets.”

³⁸ Xiao, “Art 2.1 Translating Ai Weiwei: Bringing Chinese Social Media Art to the English Twittersphere, Part 1.”

Bridging the Great Firewall

Ai Weiwei has a long history with circumventing government censorship in China. Before Ai Weiwei joined Twitter, he began his online activism through blogging on the site Sina.com in October of 2005.³⁹ This microblogging site is hosted within China's firewall and thus under the government's control.⁴⁰ Therefore, Ai Weiwei would often find that some of his posts were removed by government censors. When this would happen, he would simply re-blog his post again.⁴¹ His blog became very popular during its four year run, drawing approximately 10,680 viewers.⁴² Yet, on May 28, 2009, after the one year anniversary of the Sichuan earthquake tragedy, authorities shut down Ai Weiwei's Sina blog completely.⁴³ Then, he turned to another Chinese microblogging site known as Weibo ((微博), which is similar to a Chinese version of Twitter.⁴⁴ Yet, since this site is also hosted within the firewall, his posts were often deemed as too controversial and incendiary by the government who then proceeded to shut off his account.⁴⁵ In an attempt to disguise Ai Weiwei's real account from the authorities, his followers created multiple accounts with different user names such as "WeiweiAi" and "Weiweiwei."⁴⁶

³⁹ Lee Ambrozy, tran., *Ai Weiwei's Blog: Writings, Interviews, and Digital Rants, 2006-2009* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2011). p. 247

⁴⁰ Alison Klayman, "Documenting the Story of Ai Weiwei: Behind the scenes with filmmaker Alison Klayman," *PBS Frontline: Who's Afraid of Ai Weiwei?*, March 29, 2011, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/ai-wei-wei/ai-weiwei-story/#2>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Siu-Lee Wee, "Ai Weiwei says censors removed his microblog," *Reuters* (Beijing, March 19, 2012), <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/19/us-china-artist-microblog-idUSBRE82I09U20120319>.

⁴³ Ambrozy, *Ai Weiwei's Blog: Writings, Interviews, and Digital Rants, 2006-2009*. p. 248

⁴⁴ Klayman, "Documenting the Story of Ai Weiwei: Behind the scenes with filmmaker Alison Klayman."

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Eventually, he decided to shift his social media activities outside of the firewall completely, in a process known in China as "jumping over the firewall" (翻墙).⁴⁷ He began using Twitter, with the handle @aiww, which he accessed through a virtual private network (VPN). A VPN allows one to access the internet through a remote server in another country and thus Ai Weiwei was able to bypass the Chinese government's restrictions.⁴⁸

Ahmed Maher in Egypt

The April 6th Movement, or A6Y, was founded in 2008 by Ahmed Maher and Israa Abdel-Fattah.⁴⁹ They met as volunteers for the El Ghad party, an opposition party led by Ayman Nour.⁵⁰ On March 23, 2008, Israa Abdel-Fattah created the April 6 Youth Facebook page as a way to support the upcoming factory workers' strike in the sleepy, industrial town of El-Mahalla el-Kubra.⁵¹ They embarked on an intense mobilization campaign through the use of Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, and Flickr to disseminate information about the protest and organize people to partake in collective action.⁵²

However, the Facebook page was the main source of communication as the April 6 Youth movement was one of the first groups in Egypt to recognize its utility.⁵³ "They sent out emails inviting people to join, urged participants to change their profile pictures to the A6Y logo, and inundated Facebook news feeds with protest-related information."⁵⁴ Due to the high volume of outgoing messages and invites to join the A6Y group sent by Maher through Facebook, his

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ David Wolman, "The Instigators," *The Atavist*, no. 4 (April 2011): p. 4.

⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 5

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² "Ahmed Maher," *Atlantic Council*, n.d., <http://www.acus.org/users/ahmed-maher>.

⁵³ Merlyna Lim, "Clicks, Cabs, and Coffee Houses: Social Media and Oppositional Movements in Egypt, 2004-2011," *Journal of Communication* 62, no. 2 (April 2012): p.239.

⁵⁴ Wolman, "The Instigators." P. 5.

account was disabled multiple times by the site itself, not government officials.⁵⁵ As Wael Abbas, a notable Egyptian blogger stated, “They considered him as a spammer and closed his account while [Israa Abdel-Fattah’s] role was to help in administrating the site and deleting derogatory comments only.”⁵⁶ Yet, Maher’s efforts to inform and mobilize people online proved successful since by the end of March, the Facebook group had about 40,000 members.⁵⁷ Followers even began changing their profile picture to the A6Y logo.⁵⁸ This way the logo would pop up in the News Feed of anyone connected to the A6Y group and prompt others to find out more or even join. “Adding to this barrage, the activists kept loading a link to the group into their Status Update fields, further flooding Egypt’s Facebook universe with connections to the group and its message.”⁵⁹ The Facebook page accumulated more than 70,000 followers by the time the strike occurred.⁶⁰ The strike, which was thought to go unnoticed, had the opposite effect. The domestic and international media sensationalized the event, stirring Egypt’s internal security forces.⁶¹ The strike quickly turned ugly as four protestors were killed and 400 were jailed.⁶² Before long, the Egyptian security forces began tracking down the A6Y leaders.

Government Online Crackdowns

What followed after the strike was an intense government crackdown on all online activities. While the mainstream media censored videos and accounts of the gruesome strike,

⁵⁵ David Wolman, “Cairo Activists Use Facebook to Rattle Regime,” *Wired*, October 20, 2008, http://www.wired.com/techbiz/startups/magazine/16-11/ff_facebookegypt?currentPage=all.

⁵⁶ Amira Al Hussaini, “Egypt: Torture for Bloggers and Activists,” *Global Voices*, May 16, 2008, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2008/05/16/egypt-torture-for-bloggers-and-activists/>.

⁵⁷ Wolman, “Cairo Activists Use Facebook to Rattle Regime.”

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ David M. Faris, “The end of the beginning: The failure of April 6th and the future of electronic activism in Egypt,” *Arab Media & Society*, no. 9 (2009), <http://www.arabmediasociety.com/index.php?article=723&p=0>.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² M Kirk, “Revolution in Cairo,” *Frontline*, February 22, 2011, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/revolution-in-cairo/>.

members of the Facebook group were able to post the images online.⁶³ Angered government officials threatened to shut down Facebook immediately after the strike although the regime eventually backed off the threat.⁶⁴ “In the wake of the April 6 crackdowns, Maher watched as thousands of Facebook-using Egyptians left the group, and by extension the upstart movement.”⁶⁵ Security officers created fake aliases and joined the Facebook group to find any information to prepare them for the upcoming protest in May for Mubarak’s birthday.⁶⁶ They also tried to delegitimize the movement by slandering Maher through creating bogus pages under his name.⁶⁷ More often than not, their efforts were highly transparent. The Facebook profiles of the saboteurs were usually blank with hardly any friends, photos or wall posts.⁶⁸ In some cases, the state security operatives openly infiltrated the network, using the golden eagle from the Egyptian flag as their profile pictures.⁶⁹ “Activists also put plans to a vote within Facebook, which served as a filter on the fake activists’ contributions to the discussion. The ideas voiced by saboteurs would quickly become outliers, forgotten along with other, more pedestrian bad ideas.”⁷⁰ Sometimes the core members of the A6Y group, known as The Kitchen (*El Matbakh*), would shift communication efforts away from the visible discussion areas on the Facebook page to smaller Facebook groups or online chat rooms in hopes of avoiding state operatives.⁷¹

A6Y’s Counter Attack

Later in the summer of 2009, it was discovered that state security plants had been attending meetings of A6Y. These plants commandeered the conversation arguing that using

⁶³ Wolman, “Cairo Activists Use Facebook to Rattle Regime.”

⁶⁴ Wolman, “The Instigators.” p. 5.

⁶⁵ Wolman, “Cairo Activists Use Facebook to Rattle Regime.”

⁶⁶ Wolman, “The Instigators.” p. 5.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid. p. 7.

⁶⁹ Wolman, “Cairo Activists Use Facebook to Rattle Regime.”

⁷⁰ Wolman, “The Instigators.” p. 7.

⁷¹ Ibid.

“technologies like Google and Facebook was wrong because they were built by American companies.”⁷² Once again these plants were easily identified, but not before they were able to hack into the A6Y leaders’ email accounts and make their email correspondences public.⁷³ A counter attack was soon developed by the A6Y leaders. Mohammed Adel, 19 year old political blogger, created a decoy Facebook page that made it seem as if scandalous information was being presented on Ahmed Maher and A6Y.⁷⁴ However, in order to view the information on the page, one had to input their email addresses and passwords. Then Adel collected the log in information and presented them to the followers of A6Y.⁷⁵ Maher soon realized the growing online threat from security forces was becoming more dangerous in the way that “sowing doubt on the Internet about A6Y’s authenticity could undercut support from its base. Much of the battle between state security and activists had moved online.”⁷⁶

IV. Discussion

It is difficult to measure the success of these two activists through their use of social media. Correlations can be established but trying to prove causation is nearly impossible due to the multitude of factors. Despite this, there have been attempts to define success. Is their success based on how many followers they are able to inspire online action (i.e number of retweets or level of engagement in the Facebook group)? Is it based on how many people they are able to inform and influence in order to spur offline collective action in the streets? Is it based on whether or not their desired political goals were achieved? Or is it based on their ability to bypass government censorship in order to carry out their activities online? To a certain extent all of these questions and more must be taken into consideration when examining their success as

⁷² Ibid. p. 8.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

internet activists. However, it is more important to understand the goals of these two activists when using social media as a platform for dissent as well as the differences with how they use social media to achieve these goals. From this understanding, one is able to better analyze the potentials and limitations of using social media for activism.

In regards to Ai Weiwei, his aim is to inform Chinese citizens and others about events which the Chinese government tries so hard to conceal and control, such as the death toll from the Sichuan earthquake. More broadly speaking, he yearns for a society that allows freedom of expression and openness among its members, not fear and censorship. According to Ai Weiwei, “The internet is the answer to achieve a civil society or to get young people to be engaged, to be involved, and to be informed, and to freely associate and communicate with other people.”⁷⁷ Therefore, he sees the internet as a direct tool to achieve his goals, since platforms like Twitter and other social media sites foster information sharing, exchange, and to a certain degree openness, which are the foundations of a civil society. He believes that “[it] is the only vehicle for people to even sense there's another person who shares the same idea or who can offer different information about what is happening.”⁷⁸

While he does want citizens to act and take a stand against the government, he is not concerned with offline collective action in the same way Ahmed Maher is. As seen with the “Say Your Real Name Activity,” his overarching message to individuals is to be accountable for their actions. To him, it does not matter whether taking a stand against the government happens on the web or in the streets as long as it is happening. His goal is to change perceptions first, hoping that actions will soon follow. He states: “We are part of the society. If we can change ourselves,

⁷⁷ Ai Weiwei: *The Internet vs. The Chinese Government*, Big Think, 2012, <http://www.hirshhorn.si.edu/collection/ai-weiwei-according-to-what/#collection=ai-weiwei-internet-is-the-answer>.

⁷⁸ *Art, China, Censorship According to Ai Weiwei*, PBS News Hour, 2012, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/july-dec12/weiwei_12-11.html.

if we can act, so that means part of our society had changed. If more people can do so, then we can change the society.”⁷⁹

It is also important to note that Ai Weiwei is not a part of any clearly defined movement like Ahmed Maher and the April 6th. While both leaders are frustrated with the repressive societies that they live in, Ai Weiwei has more broad based political aims. He seems driven in changing the perceptions and actions of the people just as much as the government. Although it would be hard to classify his following as a movement, he does work within a network of other high profile Chinese activists such as Tan Zuoren in regards to the Citizens Investigation for the Sichuan earthquake victims as well as Liu Xiaobo.⁸⁰ He also has a very supportive following and in some circles he is even referred to as "Ai Shen" online, which translates closely to "Holy Ai" or "Ai God."⁸¹

Ahmed Maher is a dissident leader in a different context. Since he was involved in the April 6th movement, his political goals are more specific and concrete in relation to the movement. He and others called for “the institution of a national minimum wage, the indexing of prices to inflation, the election of a constituent assembly to draft a new constitution, and the suspension of gas exports to Israel.”⁸² However, his broader goals when it comes to using social media are more about informing and encouraging the public to get involved in the political process.⁸³ Unlike Ai Weiwei who views the internet and social media platforms as a direct tool

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Klayman, *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry*.

⁸¹ “Who’s Afraid of Ai Weiwei?,” *PBS Frontline*, March 29, 2011, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/ai-weiwei/etc/transcript.html>.

⁸² Faris, “The end of the beginning: The failure of April 6th and the future of electronic activism in Egypt.”

⁸³ “Guide to Egypt’s Transition: Interview with Ahmed Maher Co-founder of the April 6 Youth Movement,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, n.d., <http://egyptelections.carnegieendowment.org/2010/11/08/interview-with-ahmed-maher-co-founder-of-the-april-6-youth-movement>.

for an open and freer society, Ahmed Maher places greater importance on offline collective action. Maher explains, "His group's main goal was to "change the mentality in the street" by spreading news of demonstrations via word of mouth."⁸⁴ Ahmed Maher used the Facebook group as a way to inform and engage citizens on the upcoming street protests as well as communicate on the ground information during the protests. Thus, the Facebook group can be seen as more of a communicative and mobilizing tool. To him, the real activism takes place offline.

Despite this, the potential of using Facebook in this communicative and mobilizing capacity is highly valued in a repressive society. "For young people in Egypt, Facebook, which allows users to speak freely to one another and encourages them to form groups, is irresistible as a platform not only for social interaction but also for dissent."⁸⁵ Since 1981, Mubarak's state of emergency law has restricted freedom of speech and the right to assemble.⁸⁶ "It allows the police to arrest people without charges, allows the government to ban political organizations and makes it illegal for more than five people to gather without a license from the government."⁸⁷ So when the people, as well as the media, since newspapers are monitored closely by the government, have no other avenues to air their grievances, these social media tools appear as a viable option.

One of the key reasons why the A6Y Facebook group achieved success as an initial online mobilizing tool was because the Egyptian state authorities were unaware of this product and how it worked. At the time, Facebook was growing in popularity and was quickly becoming one of the most visited web sites in Egypt. In January 2008, when Egypt's national soccer team made it to the finals in the Africa Cup, the number of Facebook users in Egypt exploded. The

⁸⁴ Dale Sprusansky, "Youth Leader Assesses Egypt's Future," *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* 31, no. 1 (January 2012): 1.

⁸⁵ Samantha M. Shapiro, "Revolution, Facebook-Style," *The New York Times*, January 22, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/25/magazine/25bloggers-t.html?_r=2&.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

Facebook group launched in support of Egypt's national soccer team grew to over 45,000 members out of the approximately one million members on the site in total.⁸⁸ For Ahmed Maher and the other founders of the April 6th Movement, this was seen as a huge breakthrough in Facebook's utility to mobilize support quickly. Yet, security officials had not yet realized this and underrated Facebook's value. "Perhaps believing that Facebook was no more than a mechanism for kids to vent angst, [officials] paid little attention to the crescendo leading up to April 6, underestimating the network's ability to galvanize opposition."⁸⁹

However, once the April 6th protests took place, it was time for the state to crack down on the culprits. Shortly after Maher was arrested and beaten in order for officials to try to get more information concerning the Facebook group and its activities. The treatment of Maher by state officials demonstrated just how oblivious they were when it came to understanding this platform of dissent. Officials kept questioning Maher about an online friend named "Fatima."⁹⁰ Yet, when Maher said he did not know this person in real life, his torturers seemed confused and did not understand what he meant.⁹¹ In response to Maher's treatment, Mona Eltahawy states that "he was taken in and beaten so that he could give the police the password for the Facebook group when there was no password all along. So it just shows you how clueless the regime and their security apparatus was."⁹² It became clear that at the beginning of this movement, officials were unaware of this platform as well as how it was being used for collective action. "State security was aware of online dissidents but was completely caught off guard by the popularity of the Facebook group. In recent years, agents had concentrated intimidation efforts on individuals,

⁸⁸ Wolman, "Cairo Activists Use Facebook to Rattle Regime."

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Kirk, "Revolution in Cairo."

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

especially bloggers with a significant readership.”⁹³ Thus, their underestimation of Facebook as a mobilizing tool helped contribute to A6Y’s initial success in circumventing online authority.

While Facebook and other forms of social media have the potential to quickly mobilize and disseminate information, there are limitations as well. One of the limitations when using social media is that it is much easier for state security officials to track dissidents’ activities and even shut down their accounts. This becomes most apparent with Ai Weiwei since he works as a single microblogger activist. Since Twitter, blogs, and similar platforms are usually done at the individual level, it is much easier for authorities to track down these activists compared to tracking all the users in a Facebook group. Especially when they are working from a single user account as seen with Ai Weiwei’s microblog, all authorities have to do is simply shut down the account within the firewall. In order to bypass these restrictions, Ai Weiwei had to resort to Twitter since it is outside the firewall. Similarly in Egypt after the April 6th protests, authorities threatened to shut down Facebook entirely.⁹⁴ The decision to not block Facebook was most likely due to the fact that authorities believed it would be easier to trace users if it was kept unblocked.⁹⁵ This became apparent as state security officials began openly infiltrating the Facebook group. Also, their obvious hacking attempts further prove their lack of knowledge when using this type of social media.

Another limitation when using social media for activism may be the platform itself. In both cases, Facebook and Twitter were seen to have technological constraints when transmitting high volume messages. Faris declares:

⁹³ Wolman, “Cairo Activists Use Facebook to Rattle Regime.”

⁹⁴ “Rumors of a Facebook block persist in Egypt,” *Menassat*, August 29, 2008, <http://www.menassat.com/?q=en/news-articles/4508-rumors-facebook-block-persist-egypt>.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

Features of Facebook's interface can actually undermine its utility under certain circumstances and be counterproductive to effective online organizing. Particularly at the height of a crisis, for example, the "wall" of a group and the main Facebook status update page of an individual can be inundated with messages.⁹⁶

Facebook shut down Ahmed Maher's account multiple times, who viewed the flood of messages originating from his account as spam. The closing of his account even led to some confusion over who the actual leaders of the group were, since Israa Abdel-Fattah's name appeared alone on the group's site for a period of time.⁹⁷ Ai Weiwei frequently experiences the shutting down of his Twitter account as well. As seen with the "Say Your Name Activity," his account was suspended four times due to limits on the maximum number of posts one can tweet in a period of time.⁹⁸ While these social media platforms are useful for disseminating information, activists must find ways around these site restrictions, especially when dealing with time sensitive information such as on the ground communications during protests.

It is also important to discuss what happens when the contested power struggle between activists and authoritarian regimes moves offline. How does the arrest of these notable figures affect their activism and what does it mean? From the point of view of the state, the arrest of these high profile dissidents is suppose to instill fear and quell any further activism and sources of contention. Nevertheless, the results are mixed. In the case of Ai Weiwei, beginning in April 2011 he was held under detention for 81 days without charge, mostly under solitary

⁹⁶ Faris, "The end of the beginning: The failure of April 6th and the future of electronic activism in Egypt."

⁹⁷ Al Hussaini, "Egypt: Torture for Bloggers and Activists."

⁹⁸ Xiao, "Anonymous Tweets."

confinement.⁹⁹ His detention came on the heels of the Arab Spring. Fearing that the events in the Middle East would spark similar reactions in China, the authorities decided to clamp down on many cyberactivists.¹⁰⁰ In retribution for his activism, his company was subsequently charged with tax evasion and later once his bail restrictions were lifted, the government also threatened him with the ludicrous charges of pornography and bigamy.¹⁰¹ Upon his release from detention, Ai was not allowed to use Twitter, travel outside the country, or accept interviews for a year, all of which he ignored.¹⁰² Whether or not this type of treatment dissuaded others from continuing their online activism is difficult to deduce. If anything, Ai Weiwei's detention propelled his stardom forward as many of his followers were calling for his release with the hashtags #FreeAiWeiwei #FreeChina.¹⁰³ Even though Ai Weiwei has been blocked from creating any microblogging accounts within the firewall, he is still active on Twitter with over 131,000 followers.¹⁰⁴ According to Ai Weiwei, "Censorship by itself doesn't work. It is, as Mao said, about the pen and the gun. At midnight they can come into your room and take you away. They can put a black hood on you, take you to a secret place and interrogate you, trying to stop what you're doing."¹⁰⁵ Ai Weiwei's case is an example of when cyber dissidents rattle the regime to the point where censorship is no longer seen as sufficient and offline measures must be used. Ironically, it is often the case that the arrest of cyber dissidents legitimizes them and adds to their credibility, which spurs their followers to action even more than before.

⁹⁹ Sui-Lee Wee, "China's Ai Weiwei threatened with bigamy, pornography charges," *Reuters* (Beijing, June 21, 2012), <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/21/us-china-dissident-idUSBRE85K0BV20120621>.

¹⁰⁰ Klayman, *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry*.

¹⁰¹ Louisa Lim, "Ai Weiwei Says He Is Barred From Leaving China," *NPR*, June 21, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/06/21/155481606/chinese-court-hears-artists-tax-evasion-case>.

¹⁰² Wee, "China's Ai Weiwei threatened with bigamy, pornography charges."

¹⁰³ Klayman, *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry*.

¹⁰⁴ Wee, "Ai Weiwei says censors removed his microblog."

¹⁰⁵ Ai Weiwei, "China's censorship can never defeat the internet," *The Guardian*, April 15, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/libertycentral/2012/apr/16/china-censorship-internet-freedom>.

This was seen with both Ahmed Maher and Israa Abdel-Fattah as they were arrested early on in the movement. Similarly with China, authorities believed that capturing the leaders would scare off users of the Facebook group from engaging in further protests, yet in some circles it had the opposite effect. Especially in regards to Ahmed Maher's first arrest directly following the April 6th protest, Maher began to demonstrate himself as a true leader for his cause. David Wolman states, "This galvanizes the movement. Maher then has more currency. He has been tortured and he is now back at it."¹⁰⁶ While it is true that many Facebook group users left in the aftermath of the protests, there were also new users that continued to join daily. This became most apparent after the high profile arrest of Israa Abdel-Fattah. She became known as the "Facebook Girl" as her arrest blew up in the foreign media as well as the few Egyptian newspapers that dared to circumvent state censors.¹⁰⁷ "Instead of scaring other Facebookers away from activism, the arrest and publicity turned this meek Cairo clerk into a heroine."¹⁰⁸ Soon after, A6Y supporters began changing their profile pictures to Israa Abdel-Fattah and another Facebook group was created asking for her release from jail, with thousands of members joining within days.¹⁰⁹

However, it can be argued that this type of activism was merely "slacktivism," which is a "term to describe 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."¹¹⁰ Even though Israa Abdel-Fattah was released two weeks afterwards, there was little to no offline collective action

¹⁰⁶ Kirk, "Revolution in Cairo."

¹⁰⁷ Wolman, "Cairo Activists Use Facebook to Rattle Regime."

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Evgeny Morozov, "The brave new world of slacktivism," *Foreign Policy*, May 19, 2009, http://neteffect.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/05/19/the_brave_new_world_of_slacktivism?wp_login_redirect=0.

taking place. To make matters worse, these critics of online activism were further vindicated once Israa Abdel-Fattah publicly renounced her political activism upon her release. She quickly rose to become the symbol of the movement and then she was gone. This further proved to the critics that online participants were only interested in feel good narratives, which are often not sustainable for the long run once these narratives disappear.¹¹¹

Thus, one of the other limitations to using Facebook and other social media platforms is that it may encourage slacktivism. As Faris describes, “Facebook groups seem to engender extraordinarily low levels of commitment on the part of their members. While the technical capabilities of Facebook lend themselves to the production and dissemination of ideas, they do not necessarily facilitate the active and sustained mobilization of individuals.”¹¹² Even though the Facebook group has over 70,000 members, the number of active full time members on the ground was approximately 2,000 according to an A6Y senior member.¹¹³ While the April 6th protests was hailed as a great example of online to offline collective action, the subsequent protests that followed in May 2008 and in April 2009 did not achieve the same level of support as previously seen.

V. Conclusion

After reviewing these two case studies, much can be learned about the use of social media as a tool for dissent. Social media offers activists an outlet for the freedom of expression serving as an important communicative and mobilizing tool. It allows for the dissemination of information, exchange of ideas, and can even foster a dialogue about important controversial

¹¹¹ Charles Trew, “Why Egypt’s ‘Twitter revolution’ was a western myth,” *Ahram Online*, January 25, 2013, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/63253.aspx>.

¹¹² Faris, “The end of the beginning: The failure of April 6th and the future of electronic activism in Egypt.”

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

topics close to the people, which is welcomed by some of these individuals living in repressed societies. However, online state censorship becomes a great risk for these cyber dissidents since it is relatively easy for state security operatives to monitor, track, and even shut down their online activities. Despite this, activists have found strategies to cope with online censorship and surveillance. In some cases, government authorities have not developed adequate knowledge of how these social media sites function and therefore have inept monitoring or censoring techniques. Thus, the real threat to these activists occurs offline since the state has begun to recognize that online censorship is not enough to derail the activities of these cyber dissidents. One of the biggest limitations to using social media for activism is the idea that it can inspire “slacktivism.” While activists may have a large following online, the extent to which these followers participate in offline action, whether collective or not, appears dismal and is not sustainable for the long-term.

The discourse on social media in relation to political change is rapidly growing and has become a hot topic in recent years. However, there are still many areas of scholarly research that could be further explored. One of the avenues of study researchers should further consider can be the diffusion of ideas across transboundary dynamics. The internet has opened up borders and ideas are transferring more effortlessly throughout cyberspace to reach people across the globe. As seen in the two case studies, these cyberactivists were influenced heavily by other activists in their own country as well as other parts of the world. Ai Weiwei worked closely with Tan Zuoren and was very supportive of Liu Xiaobo. Ahmed Maher and other A6Y leaders received tips from organizers of Serbia’s Otpor student movement. Thus, it is becoming more apparent that activists are working within a network, drawing inspirations from each other and building upon knowledge and insight of their experiences. It would be beneficial to understand how social

networking sites can be used to help connect these individuals from different parts of the world to aid in their activism campaigns. Overall, cyber dissidents around the world appear to be growing and it will be interesting to observe their influence over political changes in their respective countries as well as others.

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