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Public as Politician? The improvised hierarchies of participatory influence of the April 6th Youth Movement Facebook Group

Alexandra Dunn
University of Oslo

CG+HR

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Public as Politician? The improvised hierarchies of participatory influence of the April 6th Youth Movement Facebook Group[1]

Alexandra Dunn[2]

Abstract

With the rise of social networking technologies, isolated actors with common aims increasingly use online tools to connect, share, discuss, and organize. The present study seeks to better understand the mechanisms of influence and participatory structures of a single, open, political Facebook group that has successfully organized offline action without relying on a defined hierarchical structure. At the time this paper was written, the April 6th Youth Movement Facebook group had over 80,000 members and no leader, yet was still capable of acting in concert with the intent of reforming the repressive offline political sphere in Egypt. Exploring quantitative data collected in 2009 and 2010, the analysis found a small group of highly active users that directed discussion on the Facebook Wall – the central hub of organizational activity. The volume of participation increased significantly on sample days of heightened offline political activity and, when the top participants were prevented from contributing to the wall on these days (because of demonstration, detention, or arrest), another small subset of users filled the leadership vacuum. These findings indicate that there is potential for Facebook and other social networking sites (SNS) to act not only as complementary spaces of political discussion or campaigning, but as platforms for organizational structures that exist independently of any party and act to successfully secure collectively defined goals.

Introduction

Developments in online methods of organizing and networking have led to new possibilities for expanding the traditional offline political sphere and increasing the engagement of interested actors from outside of it. These new online avenues have the potential to provide the disenfranchised with an opportunity to approach political reform in national contexts where the development of political parties is tightly controlled by those in power. The structure of one online political group – the Facebook April 6th Youth Movement in Egypt – is the object of analysis in this study. Even a cursory examination of the public political sphere in Egypt before 2011 shows that there was limited space for actors outside of the ruling regime to participate or exert influence. The April 6th Group successfully operated from outside of the sealed of political sphere to press for change.

Though social networking sites (SNS) like Facebook were originally designed to facilitate the development of offline *social* networks, their appropriation in new geographical contexts has led to a variety of political uses. Accordingly,

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[1] The paper was presented by Alexandra Dunn at the New Media | Alternative Politics Conference organised with the support of the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH) and the Centre of Governance and Human Rights (CGHR), 14-16 October 2010. It therefore presents data and analysis formed before the revolution of 2011. The growing importance of the 6th of April Movement as both an online and offline political actor in Egypt during and after the uprising against Mubarak, confirm the importance of studying the group's development in the pre-revolutionary period.

[2] Alexandra Dunn holds a Master's degree in Media Studies from the University of Oslo and a Bachelor's degree from Colorado College. She is a co-founder of The Engine Room, an organization that investigates and supports the use of new technologies in advocacy, and she works as the director of training and partnerships for MobileActive's SaferMobile program.

research analyzing Facebook usage began with a primary focus on the site's social features. Only recently has research approached the site's political dimensions and applications.

To quickly review, selected relevant research exploring the mass adoption of SNS has focused on the ways in which SNS complemented offline social interaction (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe, 2007) and the ways in which early adopters – primarily youth and college-aged westerners – used SNS as tools of self-expression (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). Research detailing the political possibilities has primarily focused on the way in which Facebook supplements existing political processes in the West, in both American and British contexts (Biddex and Park, 2008; Feezel et al, 2009) but this analysis has not assessed Facebook groups as stand-alone political organizations. Research has been largely reactionary to political developments (Shaheen, 2008) or has attempted to study the phenomenological experience of individual users. It has not focused on developing theoretical frameworks to better understand the potential uses of Facebook as a tool for political organization. This will undoubtedly change as patterns and trends in Facebook political movements become more common and the media field has a more substantial amount of time to critically assess developments.

Methodological approaches to studying these new political developments have attempted to graft traditional social network theoretical frameworks or political communication concepts. While the use of Computer Mediated Communication theory and its precursor, discourse analysis, is a promising way to analyze political online communication, its focus on the one-to-one structure of communication fails to address the cumulative result of online group formation and activity. Public group platforms of discussion, as sub-media and communications environments, affect group propulsion, shaping the way a group moves forward in establishing and accomplishing goals. The underlying structure of this type of communication cannot be successfully examined as an aggregate of one-to-one communication.

The present paper seeks to address this gap in literature by providing a model for understanding the way that the structure of the Facebook group can be used as a platform to host large, decision-making, political organizations. And while the study is both reactionary, in that the research began when the object of study was already successfully established, and based upon a single case study, in that it explores a single political context and a single political group, the methodological approach is replicable, the data collected is quantitative, and the approach is designed to expose structural elements that, when carefully considered, can be used to better understand the theoretical and generalizable structures of political online groups as alternatives to traditional political parties and organizations.

Theoretical Background

The theoretical model is built of two theories: the "two-step flow of communication" model set forth in 1944 (Lazarsfeld et al.) and the agenda setting model set forth in 1972 (McCombs and Shaw). The first explains public opinion formation by arguing that there are a small subset of citizens in a given population that are more actively engaged in news consumption and political analysis. These citizens, dubbed "opinion-leaders," are responsible for dispersing what they consider to be the most pertinent information to their personal networks. Agenda-setting has been used to describe the

role that media authority figures such as editors, news producers, and journalists have on the information discussed in the public sphere.

In the study presented here these two models were combined as a way to explain the way in which the opinion of an open group developed and the way in which decisions are made. The opinion leaders – acting as informal leaders of the group – set the agenda of the group which in turn incites the group to action. In this way, a seemingly leaderless group can carry out effective actions without an official, formal hierarchy. As a result, the group is immune to the traditional repressive government tactic of extra-judicially detaining leaders of influential groups. This theoretical model will be applied to the April 6th Youth Movement Group in Egypt.

April 6th Youth Movement Facebook Group Background

The features of Facebook groups (including multi-language platforms), low-transaction costs, and ubiquity, have, as Facebook has been adopted globally, been conducive in increasingly linking political actors resulting in *political* networks. An example of this alternative political structuring of activity is the April 6th Youth Movement Facebook group which developed in the political context of Egypt. Formed in 2008, the group – which has over 81,000 members at the time of this writing[3] – aims to provide a platform for discussion about Egypt and its plethora of problems[4]. The first action and initial impetus for the group's formation was to support a workers' strike at a factory in Mahalla al-Kubra, an industrial town in the Nile Delta. The group's initiatives successfully sparked a nationwide protest on 6 April 2008. Government officials arrested more than 200 protesters, seven of whom were connected to the online organization of the protest, most of which took place on Facebook. (Shapiro, 2009)

The group also successfully organized a collective response to apolitical events. In the aftermath of devastating rockslides in September 2008, Facebook activists coordinated extensive relief efforts and fundraising drives to assist affected families. According to Mona Eltahaway, "Facebook activists became the thin line between rage and sheer anarchy." (2008: 71)

In response to the success of these initial actions, "between May 4, 2008 and April 6, 2009, the Mubarak regime employed three distinct strategies to derail the April 6th movement – economic, repressive, and technological." (Faris, 2009: 3) The government arrested the organizer of the Facebook group and released her three weeks later after she condemned her role and participation in the protests. The other primary organizer fled from authorities, was apprehended, and alleged that he was tortured until he revealed the password to his Facebook account. (*Ibid*)

In April of 2010, the April 6th Youth Movement repeated calls for protest on the second anniversary of the original Mahalla demonstrations. In the first two years of organizing for protests on April 6th, the group was not aligned with any specific entity. In 2010, a new oppositional leader, Mohamed ElBaradei, helped to galvanize several movements under the umbrella of the April 6th protest (Dunn, 2010). ElBaradei, the former director of the International Atomic Energy Agency

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[3] At the time of the data collection the group had slightly more than 73,000 members.
[4] According to the info page written by the administrators.

and Nobel Laureate, garnered momentous support, first from a Facebook group established by Egyptians seeking to encourage him to run for president in 2011.

Between his arrival in Egypt in February and the 2010 April 6th protest, ElBaradei caused an increasingly intense reaction from the Egyptian political sphere. In late September of 2010, a leader in the NAC was arrested.[5]. ElBaradei and his National Association for Change campaigned to amend the constitutional provisions that prevented independent candidates from running for the presidency and this became the focus of the April 6th 2010 protest.

While the 2009 protest lacked a structured message (Faris, 2009) the 2010 protest clearly called for tangible changes. As a counteracting measure, the government shut down the website of both the April 6th Youth Movement and ElBaradei, but did not shut down Facebook. The response from the Mubarak regime was swift and forceful. In downtown Cairo, on the morning of 6 April 2010, several hundred riot police and plainclothes officers dragged away protestors and detained them in army detention trucks. Reports of journalists, both international and local, who were harassed, detained, and had their cameras and cell phones confiscated, most likely explain the muted media coverage of the crackdown. After twenty minutes of activity, the security officers stopped the protest and maintained a large presence in the downtown area for the rest of the day.

Months after the 2010 demonstrations – in July of 2010 – the Egyptian government's security services employed a subunit to monitor the activities of the 3.8 million Egyptian Facebook users, monitor email communication traveling in and out of Egypt, and provide defense and support for the policies of the ruling regime's party – President Hosni Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP). Given that the tasks were to be carried out by 45 security personnel, the success of the operation seemed unlikely, but the aim was telling (Raoof, 2010). The repressive measures attempting to quell the momentum of the April 6th and National Association for Change, were in line with historical attempts made by the Mubarak regime to stall, and ultimately disband, budding opposition movements that threatened the supremacy of the National Democratic Party. This governmental reaction legitimized the structural power and political forces of the movement by treating it as an organization with leaders and goals. But, aside from El Baradei's celebrity, which has only recently emerged as a voice and face aligned with the movement, there was no clear hierarchy that governed the group.

Organizational Features of the April 6th Youth Movement Facebook Group

As an organizational mechanism, the April 6th Facebook group has not been consistent. The group has been plagued with a low commitment level, a small number of on-the-ground leaders and participants, and an amorphous message (Faris, 2009). But, degree and consistency of success and government response aside, how did the anarchic, open group make decisions concerning which issues are to be tackled, and the organization of offline activities?

When a Facebook group grows to include more than 5,000 members, Facebook removes the ability of the group administrator to send direct Facebook messages to users. Without the ability to send direct messages, or the ability to

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[5] According to the International Freedom for Expression Exchange and Arab Network for Human Rights Information. See bibliography for the hyperlink to the press release.

have wall messages appear on individual user's newsfeeds, the wall of the group becomes the epicenter of a group's message. The administrator still has the power to adjust the data displayed in the Info section of the Facebook page, direct group members to the April 6th domain outside of Facebook, remove members, delete posts, and invite members to attend Facebook Events. But, the administrator has no binding obligation to censor group discussion or even maintain an active affiliation with the group. In the case of the April 6th Youth Movement group, one of the initial administrators and creators of the group renounced affiliation, but the group continued functioning. When a group reaches a certain size, the activity of members drowns out the impact of a single administrator.

Facebook Wall as Organizational Hub

The group wall is the first page a user sees when accessing the group page and, in large groups, the posted content is constantly changing. The wall is also the most public space in the group and, as the primary form of interaction that a user has with the group, it becomes a central hub of the group's organizational power. Each user has an equal opportunity to post comments and hyperlinks. This equality in participation gives all members, including the administrators, potentially equal control over the content discussed.

This form of egalitarianism is an innate characteristic of the structuring of Facebook. There is no mechanism to separate groups or create hierarchies: a friend is a friend, a group member a group member. A Facebook user cannot differentiate between a close friend and a new acquaintance except by the volume and intensity with which the user interacts within the Facebook forum. In this way, the binary of relationships (either a Facebook friend or not a Facebook friend) is enriched, and mitigated, by the pathways of user interaction, content production, communication, and information sharing.

In the group setting, this becomes a critical element of political organizing. Because there is no defined hierarchy, the ebbs and flows of content informally direct group focus. There is no group leader – any member can take the "lead" and direct the group's discussion, focus, and, by extension, activities, through the volume and passion of the political communication and content-sharing that they initiate in the group's open space.

The sum of the content on the wall then becomes the message of the group. In this way, the participation of group members becomes the primary determining element of the group's chosen path.

For this reason, the degree and distribution of user participation is an important element to assess to better understand the informal hierarchical structure of the group and the way in which the leader-less group does anything at all.

To better understand the underlying structure of the group, the research questions in the present study were designed to locate the "opinion leaders," assess the types of information users posted via hyperlink, see if there is a correlation between the intensity of a given user's participation and the content that s/he posts, and then see how the group adapts to external events and the removal of opinion leaders. To that end the research questions are as follows:

Research Question 1

Is there a small, highly active group of users that contribute to the wall content at disproportionately higher levels than the large majority of the group?

The degree of participation by active members is the primary factor of their level of influence. To assess the informal hierarchy that develops as certain members take a more active role in determining the content environment of the group, the present study sought to chart the distribution of participation.

H_1: Given the patterns present in a wide array of sociological settings whereby there is an exponential relationship between the volume of a top contributor's participation in an open group and the second from the top, the first hypothesis is that a small number of highly active members will emerge.

Research Question 2

Are hyperlinking behaviors (in terms of content and volume) of top contributors different than the group as a whole?

In order to better understand the behavior of top contributors and their contribution to the media environment of the group, a qualitative analysis of hyperlinking was conducted. This more in-depth analysis of the difference in the type of content top contributors posted to the Facebook wall, made it possible to explore the agenda setting capabilities of the top contributors. To do this, hyperlinks were associated with user names and categorized. This process is explained further in the methodology portion of this paper.

H_2: Top contributors to the Facebook group wall will more often hyperlink to media sources outside of the Facebook sphere.

Research Question 3

Is the participatory structure of the April 6th Youth Movement group different during times of external political intensity? If so, how?

Group Response to Political Developments

If a group is to effectively pursue its goals, it must be responsive to external developments. The initial data collection phase of the present study, during which the two-week structured sample was collected and the first research question approached, was a relatively calm period in the Egyptian political sphere.[6] For this reason, the two-week constructed sample serves as a baseline of activity against which spikes in political activity of the group could be compared. Three days of clear political intensity during 2010 were analyzed using the same methodological approach to assess the structure of the participation of members in political contexts of heightened intensity. If the correlation between the participatory structure and organizational intent of the group is to be explored, an analysis of these structures in comparative contexts is critical.

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[6] There were no elections or street demonstrations during this phase of data collection.

H₃: The second hypothesis is that the total volume of interaction with the Facebook Wall would increase substantially in politically intense offline contexts.

Research Question 4

Are the top contributors on days of external political activity the same as during the two-week constructed sample?

Group Flexibility in the Event of a Government Crackdown

The most active members of the Facebook group are more likely to take part in offline demonstrations. If that is the case, then on days of external action and political intensity, it is likely that during demonstrations some of the top contributors to the Facebook Group Wall would be actively protesting and therefore run a risk of being arrested or detained. In that event, they would obviously not have access to the internet and would be unable to keep up their contributions to the Facebook wall. If the group were passive and depended upon a rigid hierarchy, the volume of activity on the Facebook wall would decrease and the patterns of contribution would flatten.

H₄: On the single day samples of political intensity, particularly days where offline demonstrations lead to arrests, the top contributors will change, but the patterns of a small subset of disproportionately active users will remain the same.

Data Collection and Methodological Approach

Ethical Issues

Before beginning the data collection a series of ethical questions were raised and addressed by the researcher. The primary ethical issue is the potential invasion of privacy in monitoring a group's activities. Eysenbah and Till (2001) outline ethical issues in monitoring and researching online discussion forums. They argue that the most important three ethical issues for monitoring these groups is informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality.

Informed Consent

Receiving permission from group users to monitor activity and collect data is necessary when the group is private and several other conditions also apply. (British Sociological Association 2002) To determine if a group is public or private, there are two main tests: the perceived privacy of the users and the degree to which users are "seeking public visibility." Eysenbah and Till (2001) argue for the use of three main factors to determine the perceived level of privacy of group members: the barrier of entry to group membership, the number of members, and the members' perception of the group's aims. Because the barrier of entry is slight, the size of the group is very large, and the group's aims are to initiate change in the offline environment, the April 6th Youth Movement Facebook group was considered a public group.

The only requirement of visiting the group's page and content is having an active Facebook account. Because of the public nature of the group, there is no expectation of privacy for individuals. For this reason, active and informed consent for group members was not obtained, nor does this researcher think that such consent is ethically mandated.

Privacy and Confidentiality

Privacy for the activity in the Facebook group is important for several reasons. Exposure of group activity has the potential to affect group members' safety. Negative impact on the group members' safety could arise as a result of circulating a report about the members and their activity. Though the data collected contains user names of the individual group members and though user names on Facebook are often the same as the offline names of individuals, these names were not included in this paper. They were used by the researcher to analyze data to ensure that hyperlinks are not attributed to the wrong individuals, but they were replaced, where necessary, by numerical representation when recorded in the data analysis portion of this paper. Any data markers that make clear the individual mentioned were excluded to protect the identity of the user and thereby protect their safety and their privacy.

Because the present study does not involve content analysis, group members were not quoted. For this reason there was no need to ethically address quote attribution for members of the group.

Facebook Platform

Another ethical issue is Facebook's Terms of Service (TOS). According Facebook's TOS, it is not permitted to collect information from the Facebook website using automated software. To respect the organization's user policy and still collect a reliable sample, data from the Facebook wall was manually copied and pasted, sorted into categories, and described using the quantitative data points outlined above. Data management was controlled in Excel.

Data Collection

The first phase of data collection consisted of a two-week constructed sample in which all activity in a series of fourteen 24-hour periods was collected. The two-week constructed sample took place from October of 2009 to January of 2010 using a consecutive weekday model whereby the collection took place in 8-day intervals to ensure an equal number of each days of the week were included. This balance sought to control for day-based spikes or lulls in activity and user participation. To better understand the content that members were sharing, hyperlinks were sorted based on categories developed during a pilot analysis conducted prior to data collection. The data collected included: the user name of the member, the type of participation (post, comment, like), and the hyperlink (if any) included in the participation. These units were then totaled and attributed to the user that was responsible for them.

After the first phase of data analysis was completed, a list of the top twenty-four[7] contributors was compiled. The activity level of these top contributors was assessed to explore how much of the wall activity was from these top contributors. The hyperlinking patterns were also compared between the top contributors and the group as a whole.

Data Analysis

The group size fluctuated during the two-week sample but the mean group size during the data collection period was 74,898 members. Of these group members, there were 374 individual users that engaged in some type of activity on the Facebook group wall, meaning that only .5007% of users engaged in any type of activity on the central node of the network.

The two graphs below chart distribution curves of contribution of these 374 members. The first displays the unweighted units of contribution, and the second the number of hyperlinks posted. The y-values are units of contribution (as defined in the methodology section) and the x-value units are integers assigned to the group members, with one being the most active contributor, and 374 being the least active user. The y-values in the weighted graph are units of contribution multiplied by the values of the level of activity assigned in the methodology section. The hyperlink graph includes 374 x-values, but there were only 130 users that posted hyperlinks.

Note the extreme increase in contribution among the top contributors. This increase would be more pronounced if the 74,533 members who did not contribute during the constructed sample were assigned a value of zero on the y-axis the graph. Because this first phase of the analysis is meant to isolate the top *contributors*, a larger graph representing the entire group, including those that did not contribute is extraneous.

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[7] The list of twenty-four came from a three step process: data was collected and weighted for the degree of participation; the data was also preserved unweighted; the top twenty of each of these two formats of measurement (weighted and unweighted) were considered top contributors; when these two lists were merged, there was considerable overlap and the total number of unique top contributors in the merged list was twenty-four. For the remainder of this paper, any time the phrase top contributor is used, this is in reference to these twenty-four users.
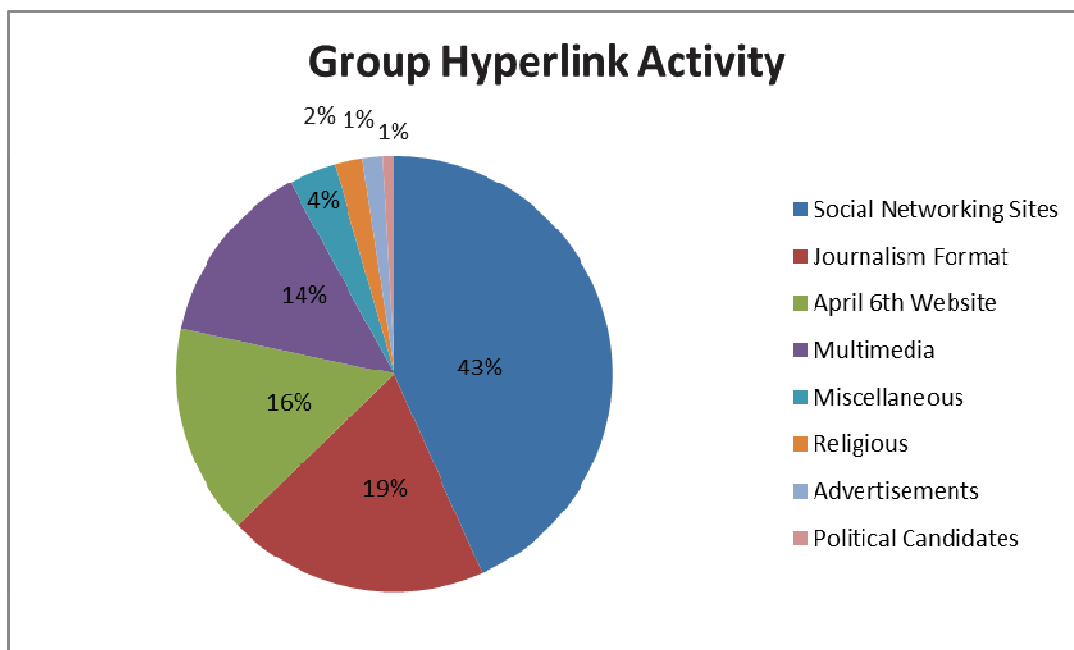
Unweighted Distribution
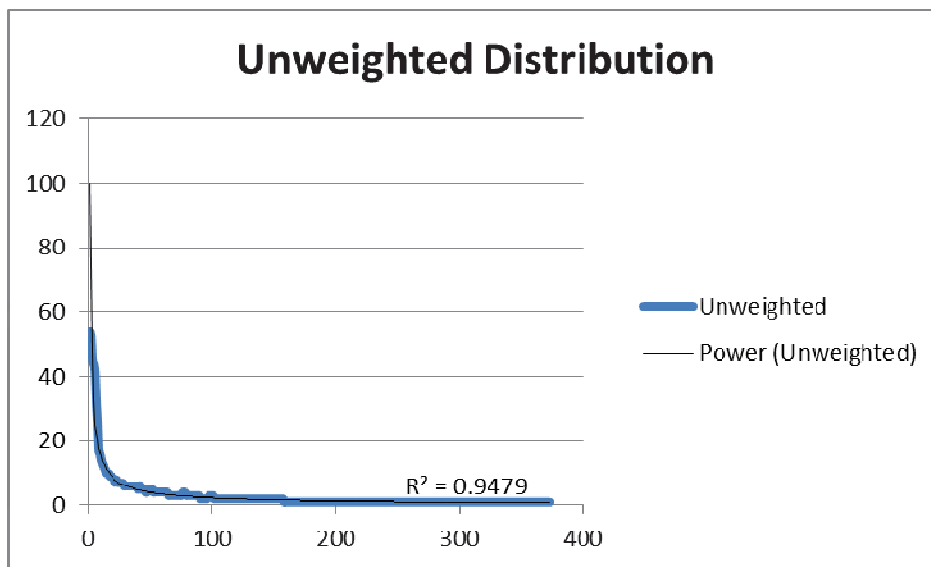
Graph 1.1 indicates the volume of activity of each x-unit (individual user) assigned a value from 1 through 374, 1 being the most active user, 374 being the least active. The trendline measures the correlation between the data and a power-law distribution.
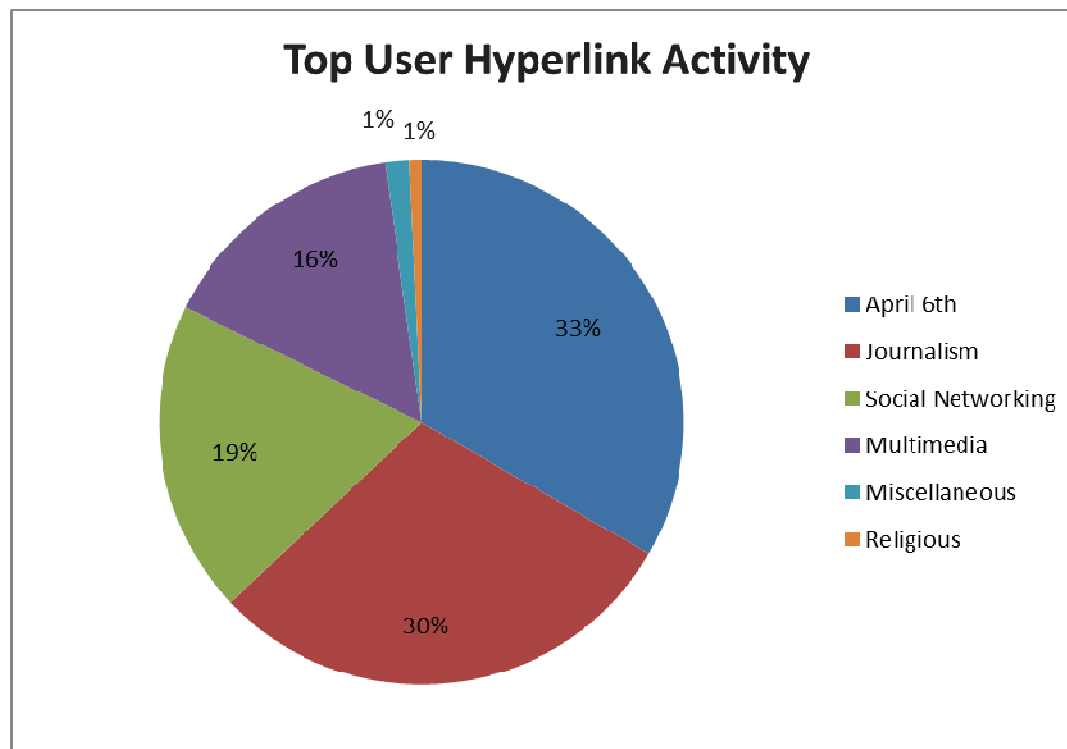
Hyperlink Distribution
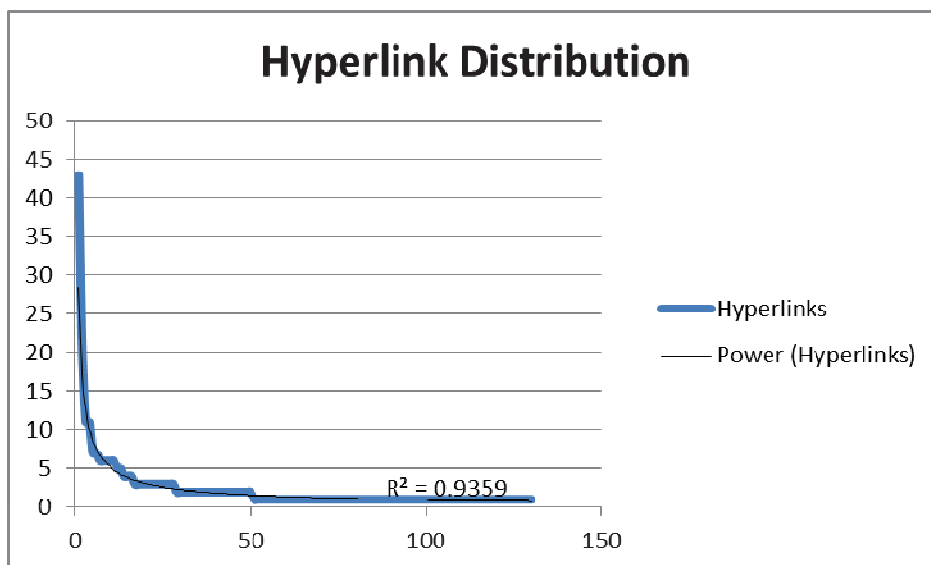
Graph 1.2 indicates the volume of activity of each x-unit (individual user) assigned a value from 1 through 130, 1 being the most active user, 130 being the least active. The trendline measures the correlation between the data and a power-law distribution.

Categorizing Hyperlinks

After the hyperlinks were categorized by type, the total number of each category of hyperlinks was divided into two groups, hyperlinks posted by the top contributors and hyperlinks posted by all contributors. The hyperlinks, as units of analysis, were then categorized by type. By calculating the proportion of each category of hyperlinks and then calculating the proportion of each category of hyperlinks posted by the top contributors of hyperlinks it is possible to compare the proportion of contribution from the top users and how their hyperlinking behavior is different than the behavior of the rest of the group.

Group Hyperlink Activity

■	Social Networking Sites
■	Journalism Format
■	April 6th Website
■	Multimedia
■	Miscellaneous
■	Religious
■	Advertisements
■	Political Candidates

Graph 1.3. shows the distribution by category of the type of hyperlinks posted by the group as a whole.

Top User Hyperlink Activity

Graph 1.4. shows the distribution of hyperlinks posted by top users by category.

Three Days of External Political Activity

In line with the third hypothesis, three single-day samples were collected in addition to the two-week data sample. These days were selected for their political significance. The three days were February 19th 2010, April 6th 2010, and April 7th 2010. The first was the day before Mohamed ElBaradei returned to Egypt from Geneva. This day was selected to explore the April 6th Youth Movement's response to an alternative political figure – in this case ElBaradei – gaining a rush of popularity and attention. The second and third days are directly related to the April 6th protest discussed in the socio-political background section of this paper. The Facebook activity on these days is an important data set if one is to better understand the group's make-up and how its members react to external events.

To effectively compare the activity during the two-week sample to a single day of activity it was first necessary to establish a baseline for a single day. To do this, data from the two-week constructed sample was broken down into an "average" day. From this baseline, the differences in activity could be quantitatively measured.

The average day calculation provides a solid comparison with the totals in the proceeding data sets. The return of Mohamed ElBaradei to Egypt resulted in an extremely high level of activity – in comparison to the two-week constructed sample – on the April 6th Facebook group wall.

	February 20th	April 6th	April 7th	Average	Two-Week Sample
Proportion of Hyperlinks By Top Five Users	68.75%	26.50%	33.64%	42.96%	27.35%
Number of Different Hyperlinking Users	23	64	59	49	9
Total Number of Active Users	42	390	275	236	28
Hyperlinks	80	119	111	103	24
Weighted Activity	533	2805	2521	1953	241
Unweighted Activity	123	1065	1058	749	80

Table 1.1. shows a cross section of data for each of the three days of external political activity compared to the data collected during the two-week sample.

As Table 1.1 shows clearly, the activity on the Facebook group's wall far exceeds the volume of activity of the average day in the two-week constructed sample. There was an increase of between 333 and 496 percent in the number of hyperlinks posted; an increase of between 154 and 1,331 percent in the volume of unweighted activity; an increase of between 222 and 1,164 percent in weighted activity; an increase of 256 and 711 percent in the diversity of the users posting hyperlinks; and an increase of between 150 and 1,393 percent in the diversity of active users.

The first important point to make about these two data tables is that the "Top User" table for the three, single-day entries includes the top five hyperlinking posters. This is in contrast to the two-week sample entry which calculates the percentage of each category of hyperlink for the top twenty hyperlinking posters. This inconsistency in calculation could have potentially skewed the data to be incomparable, but given the size of the two groups – the two-week sample consisting of considerably more hyperlinking posters than the three, single-day samples – the number in the "top user" category needed to be considerably smaller.

Fluctuation of Top Contributors

In response to research question four, the top five contributors in each of the single day samples were not on the list of the top contributors in the two-week constructed sample. This can be explained during the April 6th and April 7th sample days because many of the most active contributors were likely in the group of 93 that were arrested during the street demonstrations. In their absence, another group of active members took their place and maintained the exponentially higher contributions as was found during the baseline sample, confirming the hypothesis. And, as clearly indicated by Table 1.1, the new top contributors maintained the skewed high contribution levels in comparison to the rest of the group.

Discussion

The quantitative data collected in this study positively affirms the first hypothesis: that a small number of group members were disproportionately responsible for content posted on the Facebook group wall. This result was not surprising given the common pattern of the power-law distribution found in many studies of online groups (Shirky, 2003).

There were significant differences (in terms of both volume and content) in the hyperlinking behavior of the top contributors and the group as a whole. The theoretical framework of the paper argues that these top contributors would also act as opinion leaders similar to the traditional offline "two-step flow of communication model." The higher rates of hyperlinking to journalism than the group as a whole seems to signal that the top contributors were acting to inject more information into the group's discursive space. The large amount of hyperlinking to social networks posted by the group as a whole was absent in the hyperlinking behavior of the top contributors perhaps indicating that the group as a whole was more likely to use the social aspects of the site than the informative and political discursive tools. This could either be symptomatic of an apathetic, politically disengaged group, or of a group of audience members who read the political content posted by the opinion leaders of the group but do not seek out or share information from other online sources.

The fourth hypothesis stated that in the event of a police crackdown on the top contributors to the group, other members would fill the de facto leadership gap and restore the power law distribution of activity and, by extension, the opinion leader paradigm of the group. During the April 6th 2010 protest, the top contributors were not active on the group wall, and another group of disproportionately active users reestablished the power law hierarchy. The removal of the top contributors and de facto leaders did not destroy the group and the activity increased significantly in comparison with the two-week sample baseline.

Conclusion

The aggregation service of the Facebook wall is dependent upon the choices and activity of group members who select information sources to share. These individuals take on the role of opinion leaders that gather information in the vast online environment and repost this information via hyperlink for all members of a self-selecting group to view, thereby setting a media agenda for the group. This creates a stratified group in a superficially non-hierarchical group. If, as Habermas (2006) contends, "The stratification of opportunities to transform power into public influence through the channels of mediated communication…reveals a power structure," (419) a power structure will emerge in the seemingly egalitarian Web 2.0 networks. This is in contrast[8] to the view of Benkler (2006) who argues that:

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[8] Though the two theorists seem to disagree on the potential of power structures to dominate the networked public sphere, this disagreement could be the result of a different operationalization of the term 'public sphere'. Benkler (2006) states that he is using a rather "limited definition." Benkler (2006) defines public sphere as "a sociologically descriptive category. It is a term for signifying how, if at all, people in a given society speak to each other in their relationship as constituents about what their condition is and what they ought or ought not to do as a political unit." (Benkler, 2006: 178)

> The networked public sphere, as it is currently developing, suggests that it will have no obvious points of control or exertion of influence – either by fiat or by purchase...And it promises to offer a platform for engaged citizens to cooperate and provide observations and opinions, and to serve as a watchdog over society on a peer-production model. (Benkler, 2006: 177)

Despite his confidence in the anarchy of the networked public sphere, Benkler later outlines the pattern of popularity clustering, whereby, "at a macrolevel, the Web and the blogosphere have giant, strongly connected cores – 'areas' where 20-30 percent of all sites are highly and redundantly interlinked." (2006: 247-8) This structure that Benkler describes mirrors the hierarchy of influence that Habermas addresses and this popularity clustering is replicated in the open group analyzed in this paper. This popularity clustering results in not only a power structure but also a leadership structure. The present paper sought to assess the degree to which a particular online group followed the patterns often abstractly defined by network theorists. While the media and participation-based model set forth in this paper cannot explain all of the phenomenon of the April 6th Group Movement activity, it does provide a model to explore as these non-hierarchical groups grow in popularity as platforms like Facebook spread.

The end goals were to test the resilience of the group under external political pressure; explore the ways in which an open online group can act in concert; and begin a conversation about how online groups can provide politically active citizens in repressive political environments an alternative to the traditional formation of political parties. Though the development of online political groups cannot radically change the traditional political sphere without an accompanying push to act from within it, these types of organizations do offer an avenue to press for reform. And in some political environments any opportunity for collective engagement is an improvement on current political spheres that are closed to everyone but the most connected.

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**CENTRE OF GOVERNANCE AND HUMAN RIGHTS
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
(POLIS)**

**UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
ALISON RICHARD BUILDING
7 WEST ROAD
CAMBRIDGE CB3 9DT**

**W: www.polis.cam.ac.uk/cghr
E: Sharath Srinivasan, ss919@cam.ac.uk
T: +44 (0)1223 760 846
F: +44 (0)1223 767 237**

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