Facebook gets caught up in Egypt's media crackdown

By Danny O'Brien   2 Dec 2010

As CPJ has previously documented, journalists in Egypt have faced a deterioration in press freedom in the run-up to the presidential vote on Saturday. Editors have been fired, TV shows suspended, and regulations over SMS texting suddenly tightened.

In the final few days, a new forum found itself caught up in this attempt to control the media message - the social networking site Facebook.

Facebook is very popular among young, politically active Egyptians, with a local membership in excess of four million. While some media outlets have been constrained, many Egyptians have turned to the social networking site to disseminate news. News is spread by wall postings on popular groups and fan pages. According to the local news portal Masrawy, writer Alaa al-Aswani used his Facebook page to announce his plans to create a new website after suspending his regular newspaper column due to external interference.

So far, the site has avoided being blocked entirely by the government, despite threats to do so since at least 2008. But on Thursday, two Facebook groups, "We Are Khaled Said" - an anti-police violence group that emerged after the death of a young Alexandrian cybercafe user, apparently at the hands of the local police - and a page in support of Egyptian Nobel Prize winner Mohamed ElBaradei, were simultaneously shut down by Facebook itself just two days before the election, and a day before planned protests that were being discussed on the pages.

Did Facebook bow to Egyptian government pressure? Apparently not: In conversations with Facebook representatives on Thursday, CPJ was told that the pages were disabled because the page's editors were using pseudonymous Facebook accounts. (Facebook's list of user "Rights and Responsibilities" requires all users to give their real names when signing up for the service.)

Facebook's requirement that its users publically reveal their names creates heavy risks for both writers and readers in repressive environments. Editing a Facebook page can be a dangerous business: Ahmed Hassan Bassyouni, a civilian, is currently facing a military trial for setting up a group to discuss and answer questions on Egyptian military service. In May, *Newsweek* reported that a 28-year-old civil engineer was arrested, stripped naked, and beaten for 12 hours by police, apparently solely for his membership in a Facebook group.

But even more worrying question for Facebook users is the timing of these new takedowns. Both sites were created many months ago, and both have more than of 200,000 members. Both have been administrated by pseudonymous editors since their inception. Why, at such a critical moment in the Egyptian political calendar, did Facebook suddenly decide to more closely examine both groups' credentials?

Facebook watchers have for some time been concerned that the company's customer support mechanisms can be manipulated by third parties, including governments, to cancel pages or disable accounts at exactly the moment that would be most damaging to the groups affected. Opponents will deluge Facebook with complaints about a page in the hope that doing so will trigger a takedown or account deletion.

Both of the affected groups in Egypt were far more activist than journalistic in nature. But the techniques that silenced these groups so effectively and at such a crucial juncture are also used against journalists.

In April, CPJ worked with the exiled Ethiopian newspaper Addis Neger to restore its Facebook group. After being harassed out of Ethiopia by the authorities, the newspaper's staff began work on creating an independent news website to help report on the imminent Ethiopian elections.

During the period between the shutting down of the print newspaper and the opening of this website, Addis Neger's Facebook page was their only way of keeping in touch with their former readership. It was at this crucial point that the page was summarily deleted without explanation.

When alerted by CPJ, Facebook restored the Ethiopian site. Similarly, once alerted by human rights groups, including CPJ, to the consequences of deleting the Egyptian pages a few days before the election, Facebook was commendably quick at re-instating them. But in the last few hours of an election cycle, a few hours of downtime is an eternity - which is exactly why this timing was so catastrophic.

In countries where all other media are tightly controlled, social network services like Twitter, Facebook, and Flickr have been commandeered to play the role, not just of an intermediary between friends, but of publisher. The "wall" of a Facebook page with hundreds of thousands of readers no longer solely acts as a way to exchange friendly notes. It is the modern equivalent of a wall newspaper - an improvised way of creating a platform for journalism in places where few other free platforms exist.

With a potential reading audience for journalists of 500 million active users, Facebook is becoming a vital tool in online press freedom. To live up to its principles, it needs to look carefully at how it deals with terms of service violations, and ensure that those procedures cannot be appropriated by others to intimidate and censor its users.

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