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Protest leadership in the age of social media

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ABSTRACT

This article challenges the idea that social media protest mobilization and communication are primarily propelled by the self-motivated sharing of ideas, plans, images, and resources. It shows that leadership plays a vital role in steering popular contention on key social platforms. This argument is developed through a detailed case study on the interaction between the administrators and users of the Kullena Khaled Said Facebook page, the most popular online platform during the Egyptian revolution of early 2011. The analysis specifically focuses on the period from 1 January until 15 February 2011. It draws from 1629 admin posts and 1,465,696 user comments, extracted via a customized version of Netvizz. For each day during this period, the three most engaged with posts, as well as the 10 most engaged with comments, have been translated and coded, making it possible to systematically examine how the administrators tried to shape the communication on the page, and how users responded to these efforts. This analysis is pursued from a sociotechnical perspective. It traces how the exchanges on the page are simultaneously shaped by the admins' marketing strategies and the technological architecture of the Facebook page. On the basis of this exploration, we argue that the page administrators should be understood as 'connective leaders'. Rather than directing protest activity through formal organizations and collective identity frames, as social movement leaders have traditionally done, connective leaders invite and steer user participation by employing sophisticated marketing strategies to connect users in online communication streams and networks.

Introduction

In early June 2010, Wael Ghonim, the Dubai-based head of marketing for Google Middle East and North Africa, created the Kullena Khaled Said (We are all Khaled Said) Facebook page. The page was set up and developed, in close collaboration with journalist and activist AbdelRahman Mansour to protest against the murder of Khaled Said, a young middle-class Egyptian man, who was beaten to death by Egyptian

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security forces (Ghonim, 2012). Through the intense online circulation of graphic images of Said's facial injuries and the creation of the Facebook page, his death became a symbol of police brutality and state repression. The page, which received no less than 250,000 likes during its first three months, rapidly developed into a stage where especially young middle-class Egyptians shared their grievances about the Mubarak regime. Moreover, it became a springboard for mobilizing and coordinating offline protests. In the summer of 2010, this took the form of a series of silent stands involving several hundreds of people. And on 14 January 2011, the page administrators posted the now-famous call for mass protests on 25 January 2011. In response, tens of thousands of page users indicated that they would join the protests (Gerbaudo, 2012; Lesch, 2011; Lim, 2012).

The question taken up by this article is whether Ghonim and Mansour, as page administrators, can be seen as activist leaders. From the traditional social movement perspective, this is a highly problematic proposition. First, neither Ghonim nor Mansour was leading a social movement organization (SMO). Apart from the page, and Ghonim's marketing experience, they had no immediate organizational resources at their command to stage and coordinate protests. Second, they did not have 'followers' in the traditional sense of the word. While hundreds of thousands and eventually millions of people 'liked' the page, and were in this sense 'de facto' followers who received page updates in their News Feed, these users did not necessarily support Ghonim and Mansour. As anyone could become active on the page, there was no guarantee that the users were sympathetic to the ideas and proposals of the administrators. Third, initially at least, Ghonim and Mansour were not publicly known figures. They started the page under the pseudonym Elshaheeed (The Martyr). Only later, during the height of the 18 days of protests in January and February 2011, was Ghonim publicly identified as one of the page administrators, when he was arrested and imprisoned for 12 days. Finally, it should be noted that neither Ghonim nor Mansour claimed a leadership role. In a television interview, broadcasted immediately after his release from prison on 7 February 2011, Ghonim stressed that he had wished to remain anonymous. In his own words: 'I had hoped no one would find out I am the Admin. Because I am not a hero. I was only using the keyboard […] There isn't one of us here that is on some high horse leading the masses.'[1]

Nevertheless, as the page administrators, Ghonim and Mansour did exert substantial influence over protest communication and mobilization in the lead up to the uprising. But how did this influence exactly work? Important to note is that the administrators were the only ones that could post on the page; users could comment, like, and share, but not post. As such, the admins potentially shaped the interaction on the page. The question is whether their influence can be understood in terms of leadership. We will argue that it can, though it is a very different form of leadership than the one we have become accustomed to in the era of SMOs and mass media. The article will in detail untangle how influence and leadership were exercised through Kullena Khaled Said. It will do so through a systematic analysis of the admins' posts and the user comments on the page. As will become clear, there was constant tension between the admins' attempts to steer the interaction on the page, their efforts to actively involve users in shaping the page, and the reality of some users violently criticizing the admins and their activities.

Contemporary protest and leadership

This investigation is developed in critical dialogue with the current research on social media and contention. A key claim in this research is that in major contemporary protests, such as Occupy and the Arab Spring uprisings, formal SMOs and activist leaders play a relatively minor role. A prominent proponent of this argument is Castells (2012, p. 225), who writes that the horizontal nature of networks 'supports cooperation and solidarity while undermining the need for formal leadership'. The internet, according to Castells, 'creates the conditions for a form of shared practice that allows a leaderless movement to survive, deliberate, coordinate and expand' (p. 229). This shared practice emerges in the context of what he labels as a 'culture of sharing', in which people 'co-evolve in permanent, multiple interactions' (p. 232).

Similarly, Bennett and Segerberg (2012, p. 753) see 'sharing' at the heart of contemporary protest movements. They maintain that the starting point of these movements 'is the self-motivated (though not necessarily self-centered) sharing of already internalized or personalized ideas, plans, images, and resources with networks of others' (2012, p. 753). They argue that self-motivated sharing is crucial because it facilitates a new type of action, which they label as 'connective action'. In contrast to traditional forms of 'collective action' which revolve around formal SMOs, collective action frames, and prominent leaders, 'connective action' is driven by the sharing of personal action frames, enabled by a wide variety of personal communication technologies (2012, p. 744). From Bennett and Segerberg's point of view, the communication process itself provides key organizational resources, allowing for large crowds to act together. In this type of protest activity, there appears to be little need for leadership and formal organizational coordination.

Nevertheless, in the more detailed accounts of the 2011 protests, we do see particular actors taking on leadership-like roles. For example, in the weeks before the Egyptian uprising, leading activists from the 6 April Youth Movement, a protest network loosely organized through social media platforms, distributed tens of thousands of flyers to mobilize protestors, and strategically circulated calls for mobilization through public transport (Lim, 2012). Moreover, activists went to the working-class neighborhoods of Cairo to rally for support, and organize feeder marches to get as many people on Tahrir Square as possible (Gerbaudo, 2012). Importantly, these mobilization tactics were mostly not invented on the spot, but developed in the years before the uprising in transnational activist networks, facilitated by international NGOs (Aneja, 2011; Awad & Dixonm, 2011; Kirkpatrick, Sanger, Fahim, El-Naggar, & Mazzetti, 2011; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012).

Such premeditated acts of protest coordination and leadership did not just take shape offline, but also online. For example, the 6 April Youth experimented, since 2008, with Facebook as a platform of protest mobilization and coordination (Kuebler, 2011; Lim, 2012). Even though these efforts had relatively little offline success, they did prepare the ground for the Kullena Khaled Said Facebook page as a site for mass oppositional politics. Similarly, the tactics employed in the transnational social media communication on the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings were prepared years in advance. Detailed research on this communication shows that the core users employed carefully planned strategies, which involved translating, distributing, and curating information on Twitter, as well as

a range of other platforms, including Facebook, YouTube, and various independent blogs (Della Ratta & Valeriani, 2012; Poell & Darmoni, 2012).

These examples suggest that, even though formal SMOs were mostly absent, strategizing and leadership were still key to protest communication and mobilization. This was especially true in the lead up to the 2011 Egyptian uprising. In the preparatory phase, individual actors, centrally positioned in social media-facilitated networks, fulfilled many of the functions traditionally associated with social movement leaders, that is: strategic framing of protest activity, and connecting previously separate individuals and groups in common action. Furthermore, these actors were essential in so-called information politics: translating, diffusing and curating protest information. Consequently, we agree with Gerbaudo's (2012, p. 140) observation that even though contemporary popular movements are characterized by an egalitarian ideology, 'the top Facebook admins and activist tweeps come to acquire a disproportionate degree of influence on movement communication, and thus also on the choreographing of its actions'. Della Ratta and Valeriani (2012) have labeled these top admins and activist tweeps as 'connective leaders'. They contend that the main function of connective leadership 'is to connect people and information' (see also Della Porta & Diani, 1999; Melucci, 1996; Snow, Soule, & Kriesi, 2004).

While there are various insightful studies available that demonstrate the importance of connective leadership in contemporary protest movements, little empirical research has been done on how this form of leadership is articulated in the day-to-day practice of social media protest communication. There are a few studies on connective leadership in transnational activist social media communication (Della Ratta & Valeriani, 2012; Poell & Darmoni, 2012). Yet, we still know relatively little about this type of leadership in the domestic context, where it mattered most. What remains especially underexplored is the organization of Facebook communication, which played a key role in the lead up to the Egyptian and Tunisian protests. Even the posts and comments on the celebrated Kullena Khaled Said Facebook page have not been systematically examined. This article provides such an analysis.

Also missing from current research is an inquiry into the ways in which the particular sociotechnical organization of social media steers protest communication. Facebook pages, such as Kullena Khaled Said, are not neutral channels of communication; instead, they very much shape the communication that occurs through them. For one, the architecture of Facebook pages gives extensive controls to the page administrator. The relationship between admins and users on pages is, in this sense, very different from the relations between Facebook 'friends'. The question is how the particular architecture of the Kullena Khaled Said page shapes the interaction between the various actors and ultimately the articulation of leadership.

Analyzing Facebook data

For this research project, we have collected all available data exchanged through the entire lifetime of the Kullena Khaled Said page, from June 2010 until July 2013, when the last post was added to the page timeline. The data were extracted via a customized version of the Netvizz application (Rieder, 2013). The full data set contains 14,072 posts, 6.8 million comments, and 32 million likes by 1.9 million users. As indicated above, only the page admins could add posts to the page, whereas users could like, share, and comment on

posts. Also important to note is that one becomes a user of a page by 'liking' it, which means that posts can appear in the user's newsfeed, making them directly available for liking and commenting.

Figure 1 displays the comment activity on the page during its first year, from 10 June 2010 until 10 June 2011. Particularly striking is the enormous increase in activity from 1 January 2011 onwards, when a Coptic church in Alexandria was bombed, killing 23 people. The attack occurred as the Christian worshipers were leaving a New Year service. This tragic event triggered a lot of user comments. Another striking aspect of Figure 1 is the huge drop in comment activity at the end of January and the beginning of February 2011. This drop occurred precisely at the moment when the Egyptian government shut down the internet in the country, from the night of 27 January until the morning of 2 February. The dramatic decline in user activity during this period suggests that the vast majority of commentators on the Khaled Said page were located in Egypt itself.

Given the sharp increase in user activity from the beginning of January onwards, we have decided to take this as the starting point of our analysis. Furthermore, given that we are specifically interested in the evolving relationship between page administrators and users in the lead up to and during the uprising, we have taken 15 February, three days after Mubarak stepped down, as the endpoint of the analysis. In this period, 1629 posts and 1,465,696 comments were made on the page. Examining this material, we have focused on the most engaged with messages: the posts that received most comments and likes, and the comments that received most likes.

Following this user-led selection method, we have translated and analyzed the top 3 posts, in terms of user activity, for every day from 1 January until 15 February 2011. This generated a set of 122 posts, which were all translated from Arabic into English.[2]
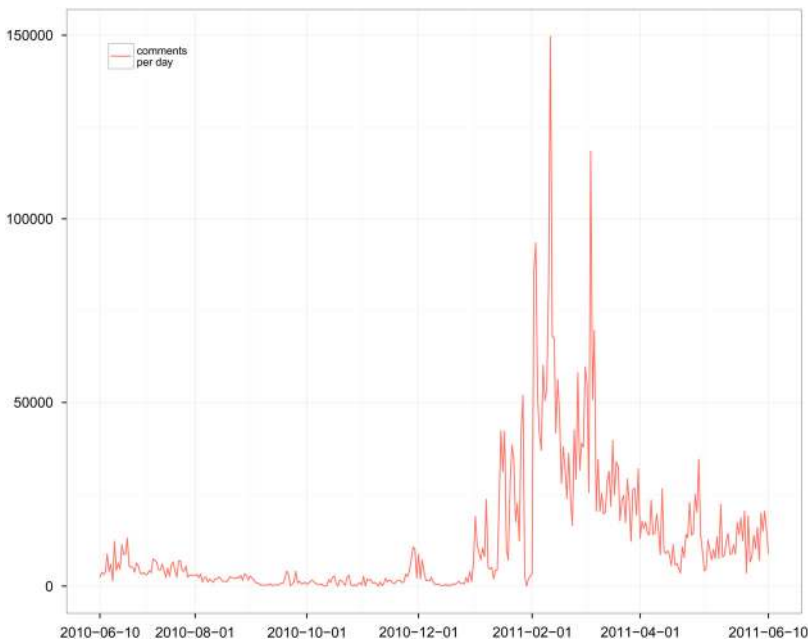

Figure 1. Number of comments per day, 06/10/2010–06/10/2011.

Subsequently, to understand how users engaged with the messages of the administrators, we have analyzed and translated, again from Arabic to English, the top 10 comments for 34 of the 122 posts. To gain insight in the full variety of users responses over the examined period, we have made a representative selection of posts in terms of content and the time the posts were added to the page.

Subsequently, in the light of the question of activist leadership, we have analyzed this material by categorizing the posts and comments through emergent coding (Stemler, 2001). Two researchers (the first and second author) first independently examined the selected material and each developed a checklist of features, consisting of keywords and key phrases. Subsequently, the researchers have compared these checklists and reconciled differences between them. Third, the related features on the consolidated checklist were compiled into categories, which can be found in the coding scheme in Table 1. Fourth, on the basis of this scheme, the two researchers separately coded all 34 posts and 431 comments. Fifth, to check intercoder reliability, the correspondence between the applied coding was calculated. At 96.3%, it was well above the suggested 95% agreement. Finally, for the remaining posts and comments of which the codes diverged, the coders discussed their rationale for choosing a particular code and came up with an agreed upon code.

By coding the posts, it became possible to systematically examine how the administrators tried to direct the communication on the page by advancing particular ideas, proposals, and questions. The results of this part of the analysis are discussed in the next section titled 'Marketing Activism'. Subsequently, by coding the comments, and comparing these codes with the codes of the posts, we could study how users responded to these efforts by reinforcing and validating admin messages, but also by rejecting, questioning, and

Table 1. Coding scheme.

Category	Definition	Examples
Unity	Emphasizing the unity of the Egyptian people	We are Egyptians against terrorism and extremism; I'm a Christian Egyptian and my friends are Muslims; Egypt is the target, not a religion
Torture & Police misconduct	Denouncing state torture and violence	torture victim; a criminal state security officer; The security in our country is the reason for the chaos
Protest	Calls for protest	We can; we all need to go the 25th of January and return our rights; Everybody's taking to the streets, I am going down to Tahrir now God willing.
Stop uprising	Calls to stop protests and respect the president	don't think that Mubarak will step down by this sabotaging; it is enough, we've achieved a big part of our demands;
Corruption & censorship	Denouncing government corruption, and state surveillance and censorship	Why is the minister of finance "expensive" and the people "cheap"?; This government is filthy;
Traitors	Condemning the administrators and protestors as traitors	son of a dog the founder of this group; you admin are fucked up; he is not Egyptian originally and he's an agent;
God & Quran	Calling upon God for wisdom, and reciting the Quran	Quranic quotation (al-Anfal: 61–62) On divine support; Oh Lord keep our land and our people safe; For me I only wish for you that God gives you strength
Ghonim & Revolution	Celebrating Wael Ghonim and the revolution	You are the revolution's true hero; We are all Wael Ghonim by the way; the people of Egypt will be confident as long as those Shabab stand behind them
Media	Commenting on the media coverage of the protests	Unfortunately the Egyptian media is mostly corrupt; if not for Al Jazeera Channel it would have been the regime that was present in Tahrir …
Other		

thwarting these messages. For each comment, we compared the code given to the comment with the code given to the post in reaction to which the comment was made. When a comment received the same code as the post, we categorized the comment as 'Confirming account admin'. Comments that received a different code from the related post, but were favorable to the protest and/or the admins, were categorized as 'Changing account admin'. Finally, comments that received a different code from the related post, and were unfavorable to the protests and/or the admins, were categorized as 'Rejecting account admin'. These were the comments that either received code 4 'Stop uprising' or code 6 'Traitors'. The results of this analysis are discussed in the section titled 'Volatile assemblages'.

The content analysis is embedded in the examination of the Khaled Said page as a particular sociotechnical configuration. How does the architecture of the page shape the relationship between admins and users? Addressing this question, we will argue that the page needs, first and foremost, to be understood as a marketing instrument. Moreover, drawing from *Revolution 2.0* (2012), Ghonim's book on the evolution of the page, we will reflect on how the admin's marketing training played a role in developing the perspective of the page. Building on this training, Ghonim strongly focused on triggering user activity, in the form of comments and likes. Given the extremely high number of likes and comments on particular posts, occasionally reaching tens of thousands, it is clear that many users were indeed activated.

Marketing activism

Although users could like and comment on Kullena Khaled Said, the Facebook page nevertheless shared a few striking resemblances with traditional media outlets. Similar to broadcasting's one-to-many design, the page provided its administrators with a public stage to distribute messages to large numbers of people. Given the general architecture of Facebook pages, admin posts, displayed on the page timeline, are directly visible to users. By contrast, user comments, except for the last few, can only be accessed through further clicking. Moreover, these comments are always attached to particular posts. The administrators, in this respect, very much set the agenda for interaction on the page. Similar observations can be made regarding the circulation of posts and comments beyond the confines of the page in users' News Feeds. While Facebook's News Feed algorithms are secret and frequently subject to change, research suggests that the visibility of an item in a user's News Feed is determined by a combination of personal user signals, the activities of all users, and the recency or freshness of this activity (Bucher, 2012). Given the large number of people that 'liked' Kullena Khaled Said and given the frantic activity on the page, the admin posts must have appeared in many users' News Feeds. Yet, just like on the page itself, comments only become visible in News Feeds by clicking the comment icon below a post.

This hierarchical structure of communication corresponds with how Facebook envisions Pages, as marketing 'tools for your business, brand or organization […] to build a closer relationship with your audience and customers' (Facebook, 2014). It is also how Wael Ghonim conceived of Kullena Khaled Said. In *Revolution 2.0*, he stresses that it should be seen as a 'brand'. He maintains: '"Kullena Khaled Said" – our brand – was peaceful and inclusive; it sought justice and involved its participants in decision-

making' (Ghonim, 2012, p. 112). It was, according to Ghonim, distinctly different from activist efforts to employ Facebook to protest against the murder of Khaled Said. Discussing the 'brand' of a parallel activist Facebook page, titled 'My Name is Khaled Mohamed Said', he contends that it was 'rebellious, angry, sometimes ill-mannered, and often dogmatic' (Ghonim, 2012, p. 112).

Treating Kullena Khaled Said as a brand, Ghonim and the other admins approached the page's users differently from how activist leaders have traditionally communicated with social movement members. Instead of broadcasting a particular set of ideas and identities, they primarily tried to engage users and actively involve them in the communication on the page. In doing so, they steered users in an activist direction, but made little attempt to determine their activity. This approach corresponds with commercial brand management techniques, which, as Arvidsson (2006, p. 95) argues, consist of 'a series of attempts to pre-structure or anticipate the kinds of actions that consumers perform around brands, and the meanings that they attribute to them'. Consequently, we use the notion of *branding* to gain insight into how leadership was articulated on the page.

Adopting this notion, it is important to distinguish it from the concept of *framing,* which has been central to social movement theory. While both branding and framing can be seen as dynamic processes of signification that facilitate social action, there are, nevertheless, important qualitative differences. In their classic study on framing and social movement participation, Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford (1986, p. 464) make clear that the frame alignment process entails 'the linkage of individual and SMO interpretive orientations, such that some set of individual interests, values and beliefs and SMO activities, goals, and ideology are congruent and complementary'. The results of such framing processes have been referred to as 'collective action frames'. These frames 'are action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement organization (SMO)' (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 614; see also Hara & Shachaf, 2008; McAdam, 1996; Tarrow, 1998).

Branding, by contrast, does not generate particular 'action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings', and it does not work through the alignment of 'individual and SMO interpretive orientations'. Instead, it is characterized, as Lury (2004, p. 39) has made clear, by 'indeterminacy, openness or potential', and should be understood as the creation of a 'dynamic platform or support for practice'. In the context of political protest, branding establishes a dynamic frame of action, in which different social actors can develop their own actions, meanings, and interpretations. The appropriation of commercial branding techniques in social activism can be seen as a strategic response to the collapse of collective identity and action frames. It provides the means to continue triggering and pre-structuring popular protest, without having extensive organizational and ideological resources at one's disposal to bring the interests, values, and beliefs of large numbers of people into alignment.

Employing branding techniques in the Egyptian context, the admins purposefully used a positive, inclusive language in their posts, and refrained from explicit political activism and more generally from politics in the traditional sense of the word. To make the page as inclusive as possible, Ghonim gave it the name 'Kullena Khaled Said', expressing that what happened to Said could have happened to anyone. And, to directly connect with young Egyptians, he began to post in the first person in colloquial Egyptian dialect, instead of

formal classical Arabic, which is used in the mainstream media. Furthermore, to leave the page detached from all political and ideological associations, as well as to ensure his personal safety, Ghonim deliberately concealed his identity as the page admin. Instead of using his own name, he chose the handle ElShaheeed, which in Arabic means 'the martyr'. Being anonymous also made it possible to add other administrators to the page without changing its signature. Given that the site immediately generated a lot of traffic, he added AbdelRahman Mansour as the second admin. Later, in early 2011, when the mass protests started, further administrators were added (Ghonim, 2012).

By embracing *anonymity*, Ghonim and the other admins, evidently, acted in correspondence with the activist spirit of the time. Many contemporary activists are critical and suspicious of mass media's focus on *celebrity* and entertainment, which tends to shift public attention away from the actual protest issues to questions of personality and to the violence and spectacle that accompany many protests. Anonymity is an important strategy to counter the trap of celebrity and entertainment. Instead of connecting protest to particular high-profile individuals, with all of their potentially problematic characteristics and political and ideological affiliations, contemporary protest movements rather present themselves as 'collectivities' or 'publics' (Coleman, 2014). Not coincidentally, many of these movements for an important part developed online, as historically, anonymity has been the norm on the internet (Zajácz, 2013). Over the past years, this norm has progressively come under pressure by the dramatically increased surveillance capabilities of national states, and the real-name policies of commercial social platforms. In fact, in November 2010, Kullena Khaled Said was briefly deactivated because it violated Facebook's terms of use by being registered under a pseudonym (Youmans & York, 2012).

Analyzing the admin posts in detail, it becomes clear that these posts were predominantly vehicles for inciting protest (31%), as well as for celebrating the uprising and applauding the demonstrators (21%). Also figuring prominently in the posts, as displayed in Figure 2, were the grievances against the Mubarak regime, including torture and police misconduct (14%), and state corruption and censorship (5%). Finally, especially after the bombing of the Coptic Church in Alexandria on 1 January 2011, the admins emphasized the unity of the Egyptian people (8%).

The posts following the Alexandria bombing are particularly interesting, as they clearly illustrate the inclusive, non-partisan approach to Egyptian politics that the admins tried to develop. The bombing could potentially have triggered sectarian strife between Muslim and Christian oppositional groups. To steer users away from such confrontations, the
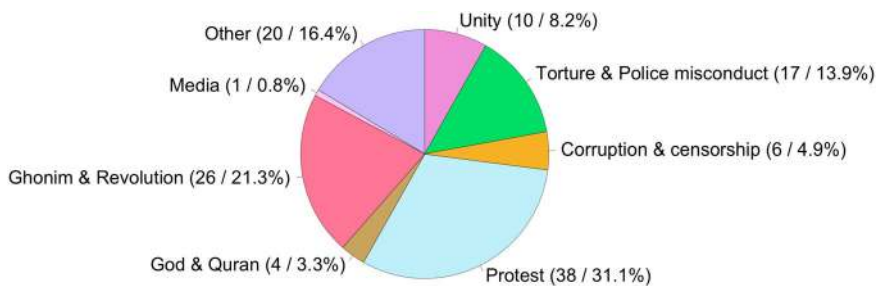

Figure 2. Accounts posts.

page administrators emphasized the unity of the Egyptian people, and strongly rejected the bombing as a terrorist act. Announcing the news of the attack, the admins posted: 'and if the perpetrator wants to divide the people. This won't happen. We are Egyptians against terrorism and extremism from any person'. The page admins made sure to strategically define Egyptian unity against the corruption and repressive character of the Mubarak regime. In the case of the bombing, the page focused on the murder of Sayed Bilal, one of the suspects of the attack, who was allegedly tortured to death by police officers from the State Security Investigation Service. Ghonim and Mansour directly connected Bilal's death with the victims of the bombing, arguing that 'Sayed Bilal is a torture victim, one of the victims of the terrorist bombing in Alexandria, but the executer of this act was a criminal state security officer who tortured him until death.' To show that the victim, just as in the case of Khaled Said, could have been anyone, they stressed in the same post that Bilal was: 'religiously committed', 'married and had a small son', 'arrested without permission of the court prosecutors', and 'tortured until his life ended' to confess to crimes he did not commit.

Particularly striking is also how the admins translated the inclusive, non-partisan marketing strategy to protest mobilization. In the summer of 2010, the admins had already successfully called for a few so-called silent stands, involving several hundred people, to show public disapproval of the murder of Khaled Said. The protests of late January 2011 were, however, of a completely different magnitude. The overthrow of the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia had suggested to Ghonim et al. that it was possible to stage unprecedented mass demonstrations to challenge the Mubarak regime (Ghonim, 2012, p. 133). To this end, they posted, on 14 January, the famous call for protests: 'Today is the 14th … January 25 is Police Day and it's a national holiday … if 100,000 take to the streets, no one can stop us … I wonder if we can??' Riffing off the Obama slogan 'Yes, we can' and turning the symbolism of Police Day[3] upside down, the admins tried to mobilize not only the Egyptian opposition, but also the public at large. In the following days, they provided further hope and substance to the call for mobilization by drawing parallels to the Tunisian uprising and by exposing the economic failures of the Mubarak regime.

> We must reach out to the helpless layman who only cares about finding his loaf of bread […] The Tunisian youth began their demands with solving unemployment and inflation … And when the government was not responsive they acted … We must do the same.

To Ghonim, it was clear that protests solely in the name of human rights would only draw a small section of Egyptian society. To mobilize the larger population, it was necessary to focus on socioeconomic problems (Ghonim, 2012, p. 137). Moreover, to stress the importance and all-encompassing character of the protests, they were labeled a 'revolution'. Thus, Ghonim titled the 'Facebook event' for the 25th: 'January 25, Revolution Against Torture, Poverty, Corruption, and Unemployment'.

Kullena Khaled Said is not only interesting for how the admins employed marketing strategies to mobilize people, but also for how the actual organization of the protests was largely left undetermined. The admins did post a few general locations from where to start rallying on the 25th, as well as an open invitation to start protest marches in the different neighborhoods of Cairo. Yet, beyond such general instructions, they did not try to organize and coordinate the protests. They left this to activist leaders with a

network on the ground. With some of these activists, they had developed previous online contacts. Not only did Mansour and Ghonim lack the organizational resources to organize large-scale protests, they also had no ambition to be activist leaders in the traditional sense of the word. In his book, Ghonim insists that they tried their best to remain anonymous and did not attempt to take credit for initiating the revolt. Nevertheless, the Facebook page did establish the framework in which a wide variety of actors could participate in the organization of the protests, ranging from the April 6th Youth to Muslim Brotherhood youth, and from neighborhood networks to groups of football supporters. By circulating a general call for protest, but simultaneously remaining invisible and non-partisan, the admins opened up an oppositional space, in which others could become active. As Ghonim (2012, p. 139) wrote: 'I was careful not to portray 25 January as a "Kullena Khaled Said" event. This made it easier for several other pages and political parties to promote the invitation as their own.'

Taken together, the examination, on the one hand, reaffirms Castells' (2012), and Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) observation that the 2011 protest wave was not initiated or coordinated by formal SMOs and prominent activist leaders. While massive labor protests from 2004 onwards, especially in the form of wildcat strikes, prepared the ground for the 2011 uprising, organized labor was not involved in the mobilization of the uprising (Lim, 2012; Lynch, 2011). Labor unions, just as the Muslim Brotherhood, only became involved when mass protests had already started. On the other hand, our analysis complicates the idea that this was an uprising organized by the crowd through self-motivated online sharing. It suggests that the sharing of grievances, as well as more complex processes of protest mobilization and coordination, was facilitated and shaped by what has been labeled as connective leadership. Instead of leading by commanding and by seeking mass media exposure, as social movement leaders have traditionally done, Ghonim and Mansour rather steered protest activity through the careful construction of a general protest framework. Whereas social movement leadership appears effective in motivating protest participation through *mass media*, connective leadership, in its focus on actively involving users in the articulation of protest, seems especially suitable for the *social media* age. Central to this effort was marketing. Of course, marketing strategies have been used many times before in NGO protest campaigns (Bob, 2005; De Jong, Shaw, & Stammers, 2005). However, in those instances, marketing tactics were primarily employed to communicate pre-defined identities, demands and protest activities to large audiences. In the case of Kullena Khaled Said, marketing tactics defined the frame of action itself and informed how leadership was exercised through this frame.

Volatile assemblages

As research on commercial brand management makes clear, developing a brand does not simply entail constructing a dynamic frame of action, but it also involves actively soliciting and anticipating user action (Arvidsson, 2006; Lury, 2004). To do so successfully requires insight into what users think, value, and desire. Consequently, obtaining user input in the development of a brand is essential. In contrast to social movement leadership, the objective is not to induce people to *follow*, but rather to trigger active *participation*. As such, connective leadership revolves around what Lury (2004, p. 7) calls a 'looping process', in which user information and input are fed back into the language, images, and activities

associated with a brand. Lury emphasizes that looping is by no means a one-off event, defining the inception of a brand, but rather a series of loops that increasingly entangle the user. Given that brands are continuously reworked in such feedback loops, a brand 'is not a matter of certainty, but is rather an object of possibility' (Lury, 2004, p. 1).

From the beginning onwards, the admins actively sought user input and contributions. A prominent early example of this was the request to users to photograph themselves holding up a sign saying 'Kullena Khaled Said'. This initiative prompted, according to Ghonim, hundreds of users to send in their pictures, which were subsequently posted on the page. Many of the pictures displayed young men, but also women and children. A year later, this tactic was, of course, replicated on a much larger scale during the Occupy protests, when huge numbers of people photographed themselves holding up signs with variants of the 'We are the 99%' slogan. Such pictures have been recognized as a creative form of user participation; a prime example of the self-motivated sharing that drives contemporary protest communication. Yet, these pictures can simultaneously be understood as evidence of the growing centrality of marketing techniques in contemporary protest. As Ghonim wrote, developing the Facebook page was not very different from the 'sales tunnel' approach he had learned in school.

The way in which user feedback was fed into Kullena Khaled Said activities, rhetoric, and images certainly took a page from the commercial brand management playbook. Sometimes, the starting point would be a poll, but most of the time the admins simply read many of the user comments and e-mails. For example, on 12 January 2011, the admins wrote, 'Please let everybody participate, talk, say his opinion and comment on the opinion of others. I will read your comments one-by-one and I will benefit from all of it in improving the performance of the page.' It was on the basis of such input that many of the vital decisions regarding the page were taken, including the decision to call for the protests on 25 January and label these protests a 'revolution'. Thus, a form of leadership comes into view, which for an important part revolves around the mediation, translation, and channeling of user feedback to contentious politics by *inviting* and *steering* user participation, rather than by *commanding* and *proclaiming*.

Analyzing this mode of leadership, it is not only important to highlight the marketing strategies from which it draws, but also to interrogate the technological infrastructures through which it is articulated. From this perspective, we have already noted that Facebook pages share resemblances to traditional media outlets, in that they allow administrators to distribute messages to large numbers of people. At the same time, the architecture of Facebook pages, as well as other social platforms for that matter, is fundamentally different from broadcasting's one-to-many model in that it allows users to *talk back*. In this sense, managing the Kullena Khaled Said brand by processing and implementing user feedback is not simply instigated by marketing strategies. It is also prompted by the technological characteristics of social platforms, which impel administrators and moderators to respond to user feedback. Thus, whereas social movement leadership directs protest through the mobilization of *organizational resources*, connective leadership incites and steers protest by activating social *networks* and managing the constant *stream* of user activity.

Given the rapidly growing activity on the Facebook page, and the highly contentious political circumstances under which Ghonim and Mansour operated, this proved to be quite a challenging process. Users certainly not always promoted and reinforced the
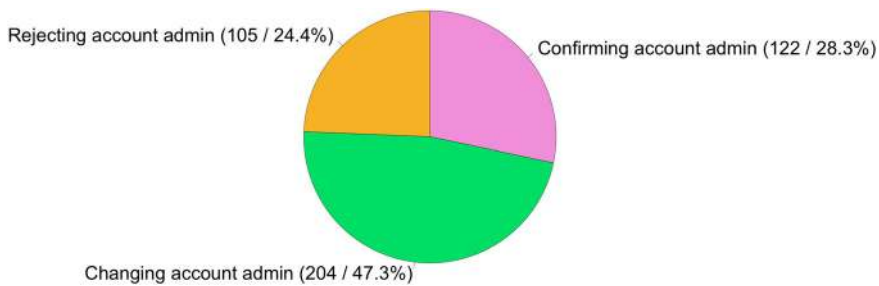
Rejecting account admin (105 / 24.4%)

Confirming account admin (122 / 28.3%)

Changing account admin (204 / 47.3%)

Figure 3. Correspondence posts and comments.

admins' accounts, but also extensively used the comment function to promote other accounts, or even question and challenge the administrators. Figure 3 gives a sense of the correspondence and dissonance between the administrators' posts and the users' comments. Less than a third (28%) of the comments reinforced the original post of the admins. Most comments (47%) provided an alternative account. While these alternative accounts did not challenge the overall perspective of the page, they do indicate that the administrators could not simply direct users. Particularly problematic were the posts that questioned the legitimacy and sincerity of the page and its administrators. A quarter (25%) of the top comments provided such a counter-perspective.

Looking more in detail at the issues on which admins and users converged, it becomes clear that the page was especially effective in shaping symbolic unity between users, as well as in stimulating users to share their grievances about current political relations. Managing unity was particularly important for Kullena Khaled Said. Historically, as Lim (2012) has made clear, the fragmentation of the Egyptian opposition had always been a problem in challenging the Mubarak regime. Aware of this history, Ghonim and Mansour had, from the very start, the ambition, as expressed through the language and activities on the page, to provide a popular platform that transcended social and political divisions between oppositional groups.

A crucial moment at which that ambition was challenged was after the bombing of the Coptic Church in Alexandria, which could potentially have triggered religious strife. Reacting to this threat, the admins, as discussed, immediately emphasized the unity of the Egyptian people, and rejected all forms of terrorism. Virtually, all of the examined comments agreed with this perspective, emphasizing that: 'all our life we've been brothers', 'this blood is Egyptian blood', 'Egypt is the target, not a religion', and 'the fatherland is for all'. Likewise, most of the commentators followed the administrators in their efforts to define Egyptian unity against the corruption and repressive character of the Mubarak regime, which they accused of arbitrarily arresting people in relation to the bombing and of torturing them. Part of the comments simply echoed the administrators' point of view, maintaining that both the victims and the accused of the bombing are 'martyrs of corruption'. Some went a step further and dismissed the regime as 'disgusting' and 'filthy', and called for a revolt: 'Down, down, Hosni Mubarak'. Many poked fun at the outrageous police accusations against the people, arrested in the aftermath of the bombing.

While Kullena Khaled Said has been celebrated for playing a key role in the mobilization of the protests of 25 January, it was also during this phase that the overall consensus

between administrators and users began to fall apart. The moment the administrators started to call for a revolt, the differences between users became apparent. Part of the commentators were outright enthusiastic about the idea of an uprising, answering the administrators' call for protest with a resounding 'yes, we can!' These users emphasized that 'the 25th will be the first of more demonstrations to follow … ' Moreover, they gave strategic advice on how to limit the chances of being arrested, disable armored vehicles, and draw international media attention. Yet, at the same time, other commentators feared the response of the security forces, insisting that it would be 'strong and cold'. These doubters maintained that 'Egypt is not like Tunisia', and that 'all that will happen is that a lot of people will die'. Here, the limits of mobilization through a popular open social platform become apparent. As the administrators had initially steered away from explicit political activism, part of the users had their reservations about engaging in street protests. And even among those who were ready to go to the streets, there was a wide variety of ideas on how to protest, ranging from confrontational to peaceful and nonviolent. In this sense, it was not just a smart strategic move on the part of the admins to leave the actual organization of the protests undetermined, but it was also born out of necessity. It would have simply been impossible to get the many different users on the same page.

During the protests, not only the limits of social media protest leadership became apparent, but also its vulnerability. Given that anyone with a Facebook account could comment and like on Kullena Khaled Said, it was relatively easy for regime supporters to monitor and hijack the discussion. After the protests had started, it was clear from the analysis of the most engaged with comments that the regime indeed systematically targeted the page. No less than 93% of all the comments that were coded as challenging the page and its administrators were given after 25 January. These counterpropaganda efforts were part of a larger campaign to immobilize the online opposition. On 27 January, Ghonim was arrested by state security forces, and held in jail for 12 days. Since Mansour had started his compulsory military service on 17 January, the page was managed by other admins during the height of the protests. During this time, page management became very difficult, as the regime shut down the internet in the country on the evening of 27 January until the morning of 2 February. While this measure proved to be completely ineffective in stopping the protests, it did bring the activity on the page to an almost complete halt. Subsequently, quickly after internet access was restored, a lot of pro-regime comments began to appear among the most engaged with comments.

These comments were especially aimed at discrediting the page administrators, who, at this point, were still unknown to the larger public. One of the frequently posted comments maintained that the admin 'has deceived us and has used our energy for destroying the country because it appeared that he is not Egyptian originally and he's an agent'. Variations of this accusation appeared in many of the comments. At the same time, commentators wrote in support of Mubarak, arguing that the president 'will work on the safety and stability of the country'. Or more bluntly, 'because I love Egypt and I love the symbol of Egypt: Hosni Mubarak and my Islamic religion'. Finally, some commentators tried to convince the page members to stop protesting 'to preserve Egypt', calling for a 'Friday of stability'. While such comments became less prominent after Ghonim was released from jail on 7 February, and especially after he gave his famous television interview, pro-regime commentators remained active on the page right up to the resignation of Mubarak.

Taken together, the analysis shows both the opportunities and limits of leadership through the mediation and translation of social media activity and user feedback to political protest. The Kullena Khaled Said page proved to be an effective platform for constructing a general frame of action, which especially allowed the administrators to stimulate and channel the expression of grievances about the Mubarak regime, and to promote symbolic unity between oppositional groups. Moreover, the page was also, after the successful Tunisian revolt, a key site for circulating the call to rise up against the Mubarak regime. Informed by marketing strategies, the admins systematically built on the feedback and activities of users in developing a popular protest campaign. This is also where the limits of connective leadership become apparent: it appears unsuitable for the actual coordination and organization of street protest. The admins left this to the groups and networks on the ground. Although this proved to be strategically wise, as it opened up protest mobilization to a wide variety of actors, it was also a necessity. The users of the page were only united under the most general slogans, and their loyalty to the anonymous page admins was superficial at best. Furthermore, the page, like other social media platforms, was evidently vulnerable to hijacking by pro-regime forces and completely open to regime monitoring. Connective leadership can, in this sense, be relatively easily undermined.

Discussion

The present study complicates the idea that contemporary protests are organized by the crowd itself through self-motivated online sharing. The analysis shows the importance of connective leadership in the organization of social media protest communication. Doing so, the differences, systematized in Table 2, between this type of leadership and more traditional forms of social movement leadership became apparent.

Reviewing these differences, it is important to keep in mind that both are ideal types, and not mutually exclusive. Moreover, as the social movement literature shows, connective leadership is not a new phenomenon, but has been important for a long time in connecting movements (Della Porta & Diani, 1999; Melucci, 1996; Snow et al., 2004). Vice versa, traditional SMOs and leaders have by no means disappeared from contemporary protest. In the Egyptian uprising, traditional civil society organizations and their leaders became vital actors once the masses had been mobilized. Nevertheless, our case study suggests that connective leadership is becoming increasingly vital to political protest, especially when such protests are articulated through social media technologies. Consequently, it is important to highlight its key characteristics.

In contrast to the social movement leaders of previous decades, some of which figured prominently in the *mass media*, leading actors in *social media* protest communication

Table 2. Modes of leadership.

Social movement leadership	Connective leadership
Mass media	Social media
Celebrity	Anonymity
Commanding, proclaiming	Inviting, steering
Following	Participation
Collective identity framework	Branding
Formal organization	Networks, streams

mostly do not become celebrities. As Gitlin (1980) already noted three decades ago, the interaction between social movements and mainstream news media transforms leaders into *celebrities*. Activists have always been critical of this mass media dynamic, which tends to focus the attention on personality and the sensational aspects of protests instead of on the actual protest issues (Lester & Hutchins, 2009; Oliver & Maney, 2000; Rucht, 2004). The rise of the internet is seen by many as an opportunity to develop alternative channels of communication, allowing protestors to communicate directly with larger publics, circumventing the mass media. The construction of alternative online news sites, as well as the appropriation of social media platforms for protest communication, should be seen in this light (Atton & Hamilton, 2008; Poell & Borra, 2012). Developing such alternatives, new generations of protestors have tried to move away from the mass media celebrity spectacle, and presented themselves as leaderless.

Of course, the rhetorical construction of contemporary protest movements as leaderless should be seen in the broader context of the ongoing individualization of politics and protest, which has undermined the legitimacy of political parties and social movements (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Castells, 2012). By presenting themselves as people's movements, contemporary protestors have sought to transcend traditional political alignments. Making protest leaders publicly visible would undermine this narrative. Yet, as our analysis and various other studies have demonstrated, leadership remains important in both offline and online protest (Della Ratta & Valeriani, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012; Poell & Darmoni, 2012). Centrally positioned online actors, such as Ghonim and Mansour, very much shaped how protest communication and mobilization unfolded. But performing their leadership functions, these actors have tried, with varying measures of success, to remain *anonymous*. They did so partly for security reasons, but also to maintain the image of a spontaneous people's movement.

Anonymity corresponds with the practice of connective leadership. Facilitated by social media, this mode of leadership revolves around *inviting, connecting, steering, and stimulating*, rather than *directing, commanding, and proclaiming*. Ghonim and Mansour shaped protest communication by carefully constructing a general frame of action. Building on commercial brand management techniques, this action frame was explicitly not political, allowing different socioeconomic and ideological groups to collaborate in common action. Moreover, instead of recruiting members willing to 'follow', as social movements have historically sought to do, the Kullena Khaled Said action frame was explicitly cultivated as 'participatory'. The admins actively invited user contributions, which informed further initiatives and activities developed through the page. Hence, active user engagement, as enabled by social technologies, does not contradict the exercise of leadership, or make leadership obsolete. Instead, triggering, shaping, and incorporating user contributions are precisely how this type of leadership is exercised.

This is fundamentally different from how SMOs ideal-typically operate. These organizations revolve around *collective identity frames*, which are carefully constructed and communicated to members and prospective members. This method of involving and directing people does not leave a lot of space for active participation in the design, development, and presentation of movement ideas and events. By contrast, the marketing strategies, adopted by Ghonim and Mansour, were precisely geared toward creating such space. Approaching the Kullena Khaled Said page as a *brand*, the administrators systematically incorporated user feedback in the development of the page and associated activities.

Through these feedback loops, they were not only able to enhance user participation, but also, in the words of Arvidsson (2006, p. 95), to 'pre-structure' and 'anticipate' the actions users performed around the brand and the meanings attached to it.

Finally, it is important to understand the different modes of organization. Building on the social movement literature, Bennett and Segerberg (2012, p. 751) stress that collective action 'typically requires varying levels of organizational resource mobilization deployed in organizing, leadership, developing common action frames, and brokerage to bridge organizational differences'. In turn, in connective action, as our research suggests, leadership plays a key role in triggering and shaping a stream of user activity. During the Egyptian uprising, the communication and mobilization strategies of key social media actors, such as Ghonim and Mansour, greatly contributed to the production and sharing of creative protest material, which eventually became a torrent of posts, comments, likes, and shares, which tied users together. Moreover, these leading actors contributed through dispersed networks to setting the street protests in motion. In other words, whereas social movement leadership operates through the mobilization of *organizational resources*, connective leadership works through the construction and activation of social protest *networks and streams*.

Conclusion

The key question for future research is to what extent these observations apply to other instances of contemporary online protest. Evidently, Kullena Khaled Said is an extreme example of the cultivation of protest engagement through social media technologies and marketing strategies. Moreover, it should be observed, as we have argued, that Facebook Pages constitute a specific type of sociotechnical configuration, which provides the administrators with extensive controls to set the agenda for the interaction between users. In this respect, it differs from how other social technologies steer user interaction. For example, the connections between Facebook 'friends', as well as those between Twitter users, tend to have a more horizontal character. This suggests that connective leadership will also be articulated somewhat differently through each of these technologies.

In addition, it is important to see that Kullena Khaled Said was developed in a particular political–cultural context. The dynamic of exchange on the page was very much shaped by Egypt's authoritarian political system. This could be observed in the admins' attempts to remain anonymous, as well as in the extensive efforts of the Mubarak regime to sabotage the communication on the page. Simultaneously, as state repression made it difficult to mobilize people offline until January 2011, the page with its mass user base became a vital opposition platform. In turn, its larger political impact can be more fully understood in relation to the Tunisian uprising, as it was in direct response to the collapse of the Ben Ali regime that the page admins launched their famous call for protests. As these specific conditions and circumstances do not repeat in the same way elsewhere, there will certainly be variations in how the dynamic of leadership in social media protest communication unfolds in other countries and regions.

Nonetheless, while our observations are bound to be shaped by the particular sociotechnical constitution of the Facebook page and political–cultural context of Egypt, research on protest communication through other social media technologies suggests that the

identified strategies and characteristics of connective leadership are widespread. We already noticed the similarities between how the Kullena Khaled Said admins and leading Occupy activists tried to involve people in protest communication by inviting them to photograph themselves holding up a sign saying 'Kullena Khaled Said' and in the Occupy case 'We are the 99%.' For Ghonim, developing such tactics was identical to the 'sales tunnel' approach of modern brand management. Likewise, it is not surprising that one of the two co-editors of the Wearethe99percent tumblr blog, which turned the 99% pictures into a viral phenomenon, had a background in marketing (Mariette, 2012).

Striking are also the similarities between the organization strategies of the Kullena Khaled Said admins and those of prominent Twitter users in the transnational communication on the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings. Interviews with these leading Twitter users, who were mostly journalists, bloggers, and activists, make clear that they too tried to develop non-partisan spaces of protest communication, allowing actors from different ideological backgrounds and parts of the world to contribute. For this purpose, they promoted the adoption of particular hashtags, such as #sidibouzid and #jan25, when communicating about the protests. Moreover, they systematically translated and posted, with the help of extensive networks of users, relevant information and points of view on Twitter, as well as on other social platforms. Finally, they tried to engage different publics, ranging from Arab youth to journalists from transnational media outlets, by targeting specific messages at these groups in particular languages, including English and French, as well as a variety of Arab dialects. Importantly, few of the leading Twitter users were connected to formal SMOs (Della Ratta & Valeriani, 2012; Lotan et al., 2011; Poell & Darmoni, 2012).

Further research is needed to systematically verify these observations. The challenge is to trace how leadership is expressed in different sociotechnical configurations. To what extent do the particular technological affordances and related user practices on different social platforms facilitate or inhibit the articulation of leadership? Particularly interesting to examine is also how leadership is developed *across* different platforms. Whereas Ghonim and the other Kullena Khaled Said admins were primarily active on Facebook, many of the leading Twitter users, discussed above, employed multiple platforms to coordinate protest communication. Another important challenge is to explore and compare practices of online connective leadership across different cultural and political settings. Does online leadership take shape differently when protests are primarily targeted at a dictatorial regime, a liberal democratic state, international governing body, or transnational corporation? By offering a detailed case study and identifying some of the key characteristics of connective leadership in online protest, we hope to inspire other researchers to address these questions and to critically interrogate our observations through further research on the many instances of contemporary protest centrally involving social platforms.

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Notes

1. Wael Ghonim. Interview. *Al Ashira Masa'an*. Dream TV. Cairo, 8 February 2011. Retrieved from http://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2011/feb/08/egypt-activist-wael-ghonim-google-video.
2. The selection contained 122 instead of the expected 135 posts, as there were only a few posts when the internet was cut from 27 January until 2 February, 2011. Moreover, six selected posts only contained a link, and no text.
3. Police Day is an official holiday to acknowledge the efforts and sacrifices of the Egyptian police to maintain security and stability.

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