Gail Ramsay

Blogs & Literature & Activism

Popular Egyptian blogs and literature in touch
The sign on the cover, designed by Anwārī al-Ḥusaynī, symbolizes a scale.

Cover photo: © author January 26, 2014.
For a translation of an excerpt of this poem into English, see page 36.
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1. Literature and blogs – two sides of the same coin

Introduction
Social criticism has been a pervasive element in modern Arabic literature since its beginnings. This present book is also concerned with social criticism but in blog narratives and against the background of a long tradition of criticizing society through literary expression in the Egyptian national framework. It is also about ways in which the Arabic literary heritage, classical and contemporary, is put to work and recycled in Egyptian Arabic-language blogs. We will become aware that a number of the same societal and political problems that have and continue to been treated in the literature are brought up in Egyptian blogs. While social criticism will be shown to be a common thread in literary expression and blogging in Egypt, a central question is how bloggers use their cultural and literary heritage to advance their goals of changing social and political reality.

In 2008–2009, when a group of Harvard researchers, including ten Arabic-speaking researchers, explored the structure and content of the Arabic blogosphere in order to learn more about the impact of the Internet on civic engagement and democratic processes, they identified “a base network of approximately 35,000 active Arabic language blogs.”¹ In fact, the Egyptian blogosphere emerged as the largest of the national Arab blogospheres, vibrant and politically conscious, “occupying a third of the regional blogosphere” as explained by then Al Jazeera senior political analyst Marwan Bishara.² The Egyptian bloggers whose blogposts are studied in this book belong to what may be termed the first generation of bloggers. They began blogging between 2004 and 2006 and by 2009 they were savvy Internet users, moving on to other social media platforms, mostly Facebook and Twitter. Although these bloggers cannot be considered the cause, their blogs form part of the backdrop to the Arab uprisings of 2010. As explained by Kristina Riegert: “… they are part of the wider media ecology that challenges or accommodates the power structures in authoritarian and transitional societies depending on the context and chain of events.”³ Our vantage point here is that this backdrop not only includes the mediascape but is part of a broad, Egyptian cultural scene. In other words, the blogs and posts, layout and imagery are in fact, part of the Egyptian cultural and political discourse, which includes literature.

The blogposts were written during the period from April 1, 2009 through April 30, 2010, approximately nine months before the January 25 uprising of 2011, also referred to as the January 25 Revolution (Thawrat 25 yanāyir) or the Lotus Revolution, took place in Egypt.⁴ Bearing in mind the social and political conditions that have favored the formation

² Bishara 2012: 89.
³ Riegert 2014: 68.
⁴ I chose to refer to the processes of January 25–February 11, 2011, culminating in the removal of former Egyptian president Hosny Mubarak as the January 25 uprising because I find Steven A. Cook’s reasoning about the turn of events in the Arab world, beginning in Tunisia in 2010, useful to us in this study. As he explains, what we witnessed in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya are not best defined as revolutions: While “people in a number of Middle Eastern countries rose up and deposed their leaders,” this did not lead to “actual change of state and class structure” something which “a successful
of a critical and activist discourse, we ask in which ways realities of this period impinge on narratives delivered in five popular Arabic-language Egyptian blogs. In what ways do popular Egyptian blogs reflect thematic, stylistic and other elements of intertextuality, and how are literary techniques employed to formulate criticism, protest and calls for action? By responding to questions such as these and highlighting aspects of intertextuality as revealed in these blogs, my aim is to demonstrate that the literary is not only an ingrained mainstay of modern Arabic culture. I argue that literature and blogging, being rooted in and sprung from the same discursive field, represent two sides of the same coin. In other words, social critical literary themes, as well as literary genres and techniques, are instrumental in criticizing corrupt leadership and society, whether in the form of traditional, print literature – as has been customary since the beginnings of modern Arabic literature in the early 1900s – or through blogposts in cyberspace in the 2000s.

Theoretical foundations
Terese Pepe suggests that personal Egyptian blogs, “mainly written in Arabic,” by “male and female authors … between 2005 and 2011,” may emerge as “a new literary genre and a social uprising.” Our task here is not to defend or defy the literariness of blogs in general terms nor to establish a new taxonomy of blog genres and sub-genres. It may suffice here to note that the most popular Egyptian blogs, five of which are studied in depth here, are personal, media-oriented blogs that best qualify as Jill Rettberg’s diary-style blog according to her genre definitions of blogs.

While some blogs, indeed, may qualify as literary, others do not. As Rettberg explains: “Ultimately, whether or not you decide to define blogs as a medium or as genre depends on your perspective.” We are however, interested in an aspect common to both modern Arabic literary creativity in general and Egyptian literature in particular, that of social revolution requires” (Cook 2015). <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/10/26/the-middle-eastern-revolutions-that-never-were/> (last retrieved May 8, 2016).

5 Pepe: 2014: iii, 6, 17, 161 ff., 371. Pepe (p. 165) gives a list of basic factors constituting autofiction. These ten fundamental traits of autofictional works were listed by Philippe Gasparini (2008: 209) and are presented by Pepe as follows:
1. Onomastic identity of the author and hero-narrator
2. Subtitle: novel
3. Primary importance of the narrative
4. Pursuit of an original form
5. Writing that aims to immediately articulate
6. Reconfiguration of linear time (through selection, intensification, stratification, fragmentation, disorientation)
7. A significant use of the present tense
8. An effort to depict only strictly real facts and events
9. The urge to reveal one’s self truly
10. A strategy that aims to demand active engagement from the reader.

6 Rettberg 2008: 20. Jill Rettberg’s genre and sub-genre definitions include diary-style blog, filter blog and political blog. Peter Dahlgren’s (2011) model of “trajectory” is another example of systemization of blogs. He poses online participation in civic life as trajectories (the direction of the engagement), modalities (the character of communication), motivation (why), practices of sociality (how it is kept going), and visibility (“where it ends up”) (Dahlgren 2011: 91–100).

7 Rettberg 2008: 20.