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Connecting to Disconnect: Internet Access and Loss of Trust in Pre-Arab Spring Egypt

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Connecting to Disconnect

Internet Access and Loss of Trust in Pre Arab Spring Egypt

R. David Dixon Jr.

Polarization
Polarization has been measured to be closely related to the generation of social tension, the possibility of revolution and revolt, and to the existence of social unrest (Esteban et al. 1994).

The Echo Chamber Effect
Research on group polarization has shown that deliberation with like-minded individuals tends to move groups and individuals towards a more extreme point than their pre-deliberation judgments. People holding rather moderate views in the beginning, after speaking to others of the same opinion, tend to experience a form a radicalization where they hold tighter and more firmly to their original beliefs, and actual take more extreme stances in line with their original point of view (Sunstein 2007).

The internet increases societal polarization.
Research on polarization and the Internet strongly suggests that the Internet facilitates the separation and fragmentation of society, particularly among those who are politically aware with strong partisan and ideological leanings (Farrell 2012).

Data
The dependent variable is a measure of how much respondents trust the people in their neighborhood, and was chosen because it provides a good insight into the general sense of societal stability and feelings of 'likeness' with those around them.

The independent variable chosen to indicate the connectivity to the Internet was a question of the frequency of use of a personal computer. The Internet was a global force by 2000, but with computers not very widespread in Egypt at that time, it likely that the use of a personal computer is highly correlated with access to the Internet, considering a huge portion personal computers in Egypt at that time were accessed through Internet cafes, ensuring a connection to the Internet. I also controlled for gender, age, and income.

Sample
The data being used is the Egypt interviews from the 4th wave of the World Values Survey. Egypt was chosen in light of the civil unrest and uprisings we now know would occur within the same decade. The Egyptian data was collected in face-to-face interviews between January 7, 2000 and January 1, 2001. The sample of 3000 households was designed to be nationally representative of the entire adult population of the country.

Conclusions
Access to the Internet, even as early as 2001, and with the limited penetration in Egypt at that time, still had a measurable and significant effect on the trust between neighbors of those who frequently accessed it. This supports the claim that the Internet can contribute to fragmentation and polarization in society, as well as contributing to a decrease in trust between members of the society.

References: