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Reflective Essay on *Repression, Alienation, Information and Communication*

At the start of the Fall 2010 semester, I began researching for an essay detailing political, economic and social change in Egypt over the past few decades. The assignment was for GVPT484: Government and Politics in Africa, taught by Professor Thierno Thiam. Each student was to choose a different country in the continent and "become an expert" on modern developments therein.

I could have chosen any country, so long as I was willing to fight for it. Somalia seemed a fascinating study in failed state politics and international incidence, but I was dissuaded by the eager eyes and skyrocketing hands when Professor Thiam announced, "*Somalia?*" with a smirk. South Africa was a similar story. Surprisingly, however, when "Egypt" was declared I glanced around, saw no hands, and made it mine. At the time I knew only that it exists as the crux between the Middle East and Africa, and that it plays some sort of role in American presence in the Middle East.

I began my research with a sweep of Wikipedia. Wikipedia is the modern researcher's light breakfast. It's a great way to get started, it's got just enough nutrition to get the ball rolling, and if it's all you've got by the end of the day you're going to be starving. With a topic as well studied as Egypt, a Wikipedia page serves as a cue for discovering relevant topics. When skimming the page on Egypt, for example, influential people and important places are donned in blue and serve as links of discovery.

I did a thorough skimming of an impressive breadth of subjects related to my topic at hand, which would not have been possible with any other free information medium I know of. Throughout this process I was *not taking notes*. This is important. Wikipedia is amazing, and through it I was capable of discovering sources (almost all of the information is cited!) and realizing a frame of reference with which I could begin to think about Egypt; but it is no authority.

I took several trips to the library for this project. I had at least fourteen books, almost all I skimmed, most I read in part, about half I cited, and two or three I read in full. To find the right books I would spend a lot of time using the advanced search on lib.umd.edu, starting with a search of books on "Egypt", descending chronologically. I kept an eye out for relevant titles published in the last decade, like *Egypt: The Moment of Change* published at the end of 2009. I would then open a new tab and continue to search based on subjects I discovered. I would click a book and find subjects like, "Egypt -- Politics and Government" and "Egypt -- Social Conditions -- 20th Century". Slowly I discovered more literature and subjects more closely refined to the topic at hand. Finally, with a list of half a dozen or so books, I would head towards the elevator.

When I found a book on my list, I would scan the surrounding shelves for useful literature. For my project the literature was conveniently limited. Other than a few books on history I could limit my studies to books written after the turn of the century, or perhaps slightly before. There is something about sitting on the floor between towering stacks, a pile of books on each side, thumbing through hundreds of pages on a topic that puts you in the perfect state of mind to do research. State of mind is crucial. With the topic always at the back of my mind,

information that would otherwise seem mundane became relevant. For instance, simply chatting with friends or sitting in class could become an opportunity for research.

I would spend many mornings before class skimming through news sources, discovering what is going on in Egypt. I referred to US news sources (The Washington Post, NPR, etc.), international news sources (the BBC, Aljazeera) and Egyptian news sources (including state run [i.e. state censored] and private sources; the disparities between these two sources were always entertaining) and I spent a lot of time talking about the topic with my friends and family. I discussed the topic with Professor Thiam after class occasionally to make sure I was sticking to the assignment, and once I had a good understanding of Egypt's history and current condition I went in to discuss the assignment with the professor.

This was a turning point in the topic. Discussing your work is essential to developing the best piece possible. Professor Thiam and I discussed the particulars of the modern condition in Egypt for a bit, and then Professor Thiam reviewed what I had learned so far and pushed me to actually say something about it. I had the facts, now I needed the theory. I was on the spot, and had not put this aspect of the project into words before. I looked at Professor Thiam, opened my mouth, and began to develop what became the thesis for my paper, which has proven perfectly relevant to developments in Egypt since the new year. I was to discuss the influence of information and communication technologies in evolving age old popular resentment in a country marked with repression, censorship and autocratic sham democracy. Indeed, as an homage to the revolution, one Egyptian man named his newborn daughter *Facebook* (Smith, *Facebook*).

With a thesis in mind my research became intense and tightly focused. I spent a long time searching on the UMD research port in combination with Google Scholar and found a number of scholarly articles focused on the role of information technologies in popular mobilization, censorship, authoritarianism, the Arab world in general, and even on Egypt specifically. I read many theses and conclusions carefully, and I skimmed arguments to catch the particulars. It was imperative that I get a breadth of information with which I could cross-examine everything I read. By the end I had such a huge amount of notes and information that I could not help but formulate my own opinion on the wealth of it.

The last step was to satisfy the statisticians. Following the advice of my professor and the sources I had come across in all my books and articles, I crunched the numbers. I looked at economic and social indicators over time and space. I found information on GDP, education, health care, unemployment and most perfectly, information on access to information and communication technologies (Internet access, mobile phone users, etc.). The package was ready to be put together. I had the facts, stats, theory, and mental organization to finish my paper. For two successive weekends I organized my notes, double checked my sources, and developed the journey into one coherent essay.

The necessity of a wide array of sources is an important lesson I have learned researching at the University of Maryland. It is easy to assume that because something has been printed in a book or journal that it is die hard fact, but we must always leave room for human error. Furthermore, a well rounded perspective requires more than just facts. An

adequate argument must amalgamate a multitude of sources which incorporate a myriad of perspectives and ideas.

A research project is an organism. It is an evolving beast that we can either encourage to grow or let whither, which we can perhaps "herd", but not "control". I like to keep my research projects abundantly fed and well exercised, and watch them flourish and mature without stumbling over shaky facts and deceptively subjective arguments. Finding good sources is easy in this day and age. Finding just a few that contain the wealth of information necessary for a good research project is impossible. It is a shame that I must limit my research to English publications, for I am surely missing a portion of the puzzle.

Works Cited

Smith, Catherine. "Egyptian Father Names Baby 'Facebook'" *Huffingtonpost.com*. The Huffington Post, 21 Feb. 2011. Web. 1 Mar. 2011. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/02/21/baby-named-facebook-egypt_n_825934.html>.