Archiving Egypt's Revolution: The "University on the Square" Project, Documenting January 25, 2011 and Beyond

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Abstract:

During the 18 days in early 2011 that came to be known as Egypt's January 25 Revolution, a group of archivists, faculty, administrators, and students at the American University in Cairo met to devise ways to document those historic events. The resulting project, University on the Square: Documenting Egypt's 21st Century Revolution, addressed the challenge of collecting the tangible remains of the protests like banners and tear gas canisters and the many digital photographs and videos taken by observers and participants. It also launched an oral history effort to record the experiences of a wide range of participants in the uprising and the subsequent protest and political activity in Egypt. Throughout the course of its activities the involvement of the community played an important role in the initiative. This paper describes the project's methods and what it has collected, as well as challenges faced. Other projects to document Egypt's revolution, and a comparison of their goals with that of AUC's efforts, will also be covered.

Keywords:

Egypt, January 25 Revolution, Archives, Crowdsourcing

A major theme of the worldwide media coverage of the 18 days of protests that brought down Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak in early 2011 was the participation of ordinary Egyptians. Television and print journalists and internet commentators highlighted demonstrators' use of Facebook for organizing the protests, and the way they expressed themselves through their chants and the signs they carried into Tahrir Square. The protesters actively recorded the events around them too; as an Egyptian filmmaker put it, "I think it (Egypt) was the most photographed revolution in the history of man. You'd have ten people protesting and another fifteen people filming them with their phones." (Halliburton, 2013)

But would the photographs and videos taken on mobile phones, the banners displayed at Tahrir Square, the blog posts, the tear gas canisters picked up as souvenirs – the memories – be preserved for future generations? How would Egypt's "January 25 revolution" be documented? This was the concern of a group of administrators, archivists, oral historians, technology officers, journalism faculty, and other staff members at the American University in Cairo (AUC), who gathered shortly after the removal of President Hosni Mubarak. The result was the formation of a project titled "University on the Square: Documenting Egypt's 21st Century Revolution," supported with start-up funding from the Andrew Mellon Foundation.

It was natural for the American University in Cairo to launch a project to document Egypt's revolution. The university's downtown campus buildings on Tahrir Square stood witness to the historic events, visible in much of the media coverage of the demonstrations. AUC students, faculty, staff, administrators, and alumni had taken part in the protests in various ways. The University on the Square project would use the opportunity offered by their participation to document the revolution, by reflecting the experiences of AUC community members.

Project staff realized that prompt intervention was critical. The preservation of digital photographs and ephemeral items like banners and signs required active collecting. Awaiting donations of documentary materials, perhaps years after the fact as often occurs with archival collecting, would not be viable: it was unlikely that photographs or videos taken on mobile telephones, for example, would be available for long. Quickly identifying participants who could sit for oral history interviews would also be desirable. So in a matter of weeks the University on the Square team developed a collecting strategy and publicized the project at AUC.

This involved building tools to permit the active involvement of participants in the protests. AUC's academic computing staff developed a website with an upload module to allow people to contribute their digital photographs and videos. With this in place, the project team launched a publicity campaign, sending out email announcements inviting the AUC community to participate and make contributions. A booth was set up outside the university library where student volunteers promoted the initiative. They encouraged fellow students and others to upload digital images using on-site laptop computers, and invited them to sign up for oral history interviews. When a lecture or similar program related to the revolution took place on campus, project staff would solicit participation at that location as well.

Response to the crowdsourcing aspect of the project was encouraging, with dozens of donors contributing digital photographs and videos through the University on the Square website. These visual resources, as well as audio files of oral history interviews, were made accessible online, described according to archival standards, through the CONTENTdm-based digital

library of AUC's Rare Books and Special Collections Library (at http://digitalcollections.aucegypt.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/p15795coll7), which became the repository for all material collected by the University on the Square project.

The project also encouraged students to contribute classwork related to the revolution (ranging from papers to paintings and audio documentaries), much of it prepared for specially-themed courses at AUC in the spring of 2011. This student work, as well as Masters theses by AUC graduate students and publications by university faculty, became part of the University on the Square archive on the AUC Digital Archive and Research Repository, a D-Space platform institutional repository. Another student effort supported by project staff was a wiki-based "Biographical Dictionary of the Egyptian Revolution, 2011" produced by students. In addition to facilitating the construction of internet resources, the project also collected hundreds of websites related to the revolution, including blogs, news media reports, and Twitter feeds, using the Rare Books Library's ArchiveIt web archiving subscription service.

The oral history component of the University on the Square project illustrated the range of participants in the Egyptian revolution who were connected in some way with AUC. The interviews revealed diversity in terms of involvement, socioeconomic class, gender, religion, and language (interviews were conducted in English or Arabic, according to the preference of the interviewee). For example, while individuals at the highest levels of politics were represented (like a dean who served on a national political advisory committee), the interviewees also included the university security guards on duty at the Tahrir Square campus during the demonstrations.

Faculty and student activists offered vivid accounts of their participation in the marches to Tahrir Square and clashes with riot police. Alumni contributed to rich oral history interviews, including those by journalists who described the challenges of covering the protests. Some of the most moving testimonies came from staff, professors, and students for whom the demonstrations represented their first political participation in their own country.

Other revealing interviews included those with individuals who did not support the revolution. Such interviews expressing misgivings about the change in regime, while reflecting the views of an important segment of the Egyptian population, were few in number. This was most likely due to a reluctance to be seen as being on the "wrong side of history." The project welcomed such voices, however; while University on the Square was launched during a wave of enthusiasm for the revolution, it sought the contributions from people with a variety of experiences and perspectives.

As the oral history efforts progressed, interviewees suggested others with experiences to share; this came to be the main way the project identified people to interview. Since many of those who were recommended had no association with AUC, the scope of the project was expanded to include the contributions of anyone with material to donate or a story to tell, regardless of their connection with the university. As a result the project's oral history subjects came to include individuals like faculty and students from Egyptian national universities, young revolutionaries associated with soccer fan clubs ("ultras"), and even the barber who witnessed events from his shop near the AUC entrance gate.

In addition to broadening the range of contributors to University on the Square, the project team also had to repeatedly adjust the time frame to be documented. As months of continued

protests, elections, and other political developments made it clear that "revolution" could be construed more broadly than first envisioned, the period of time to be covered was refocused beyond the initial 18 days. This had practical implications; for example, this required updating oral history interview scripts on a regular basis.

More significantly, unfolding events made it more difficult to solicit interviews and donations of material like digital photos and videos. By late spring 2011, when the initial exuberance following President Mubarak's departure wore off and the subsequent unstable political climate soured the national mood, participation in the project diminished. This necessitated an outreach effort that went beyond email solicitations, flyers, and Tweets about the project. Even in an age of social media, the project team found that cultivating personal contacts and making extensive one-on-one follow-up efforts were most effective for encouraging people to take part in oral history interviews and donate items to the project archive.

The content of the oral histories was also affected, their tone colored by the occasional outbreaks of violence and the uncertainty about Egypt's political direction. Surprisingly, however, there was little concern about anonymity even as the emerging governing entities appeared disinclined toward freedom of expression; only two interviewees requested that we conceal their identities in the online audio interviews and associated descriptions. The project's association with AUC did deter some potential interviewees, who criticized the university for attempting to "capitalize" on the revolution. Other faculty members and students active in the demonstrations declined to be interviewed, citing the university administration's approach to the revolution and its previous relationship with the Mubarak family.

Continued revolutionary events also affected the collection of artifacts and ephemeral materials. Collecting efforts had begun early: in the days after the president's February 2011 removal, one project member gathered up numerous banners erected by demonstrators. During the project's early months donors also gave items related to the protests at Tahrir Square, like tear gas canisters picked up from the ground or souvenir flags and t-shirts. Materials were also received from the AUC Press, whose campus offices were the scene of clashes between protesters and state security forces in late January 2011; the Press donated some of the items left behind, like a pair of boots belonging to a riot policeman.

The numerous gatherings at Tahrir Square throughout 2011 and 2012 – including protests against military rule and demonstrations about the shape of Egypt's new constitution – required a sustained collecting initiative. Project staff attended many of these events to collect samples of the banners, signs, and leaflets on display or distributed, and purchased souvenirs (typically commemorating the deceased "martyrs" of the revolution) sold by the vendors who set up shop at the square. Coupled with the acquisition of hundreds of newspapers (spanning the spectrum of opinion and affiliation), the leaflets, signs, and other written materials from the protests reveal the demonstrators' ideas and the ways they expressed them.

The University on the Square represented one of several documentation projects initiated with the goal of documenting Egypt's revolution. These initiatives varied significantly in their structure and goals, but typically framed their efforts in terms "crowdsourcing," seeking contributions of documentary material from the public. Websites inviting people to upload their photographs and videos, like IAmJan25.com and iwasintahrir.com, were assembling visual documentation by early spring 2011, but offered minimal structure or description. Other sites relied upon particular kinds of expertise: R-Shief.org on data mining to preserve

the digital legacy of the Arab Spring, and tahrirdocuments.org the Arabic language skills of international students in Cairo who gathered and translated political leaflets and other documents distributed at Tahrir Square demonstrations.

Major institutions in Egypt rapidly embarked upon documentation projects after 18 days of protests in 2011. Within days of the fall of President Mubarak, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina announced that it would be amassing documentation about the revolution for its Memory of Modern Egypt Arabic-language digital library, including material contributed by the public. ("Bibliotheca Alexandrina begins documenting," 2011)

Egypt's National Archives also sought to assemble written documents, visual material, and oral history testimonies from around the country, establishing a "Committee to Document the January 25 Revolution" under the leadership of historian Khaled Fahmy, a long-time advocate of open access to government archives in Egypt. The National Archives project grappled with many of the same issues of scope and scale as the University on the Square, such as what period of time would be documented, and whose contributions would be sought. (Shenker, 2011) That effort proceeded haltingly, in part for logistical reasons related to the capacities of the National Archives' digital infrastructure, as material was intended to be made freely accessible on the internet. More significantly, Egypt's laws limiting access to archives in state custody posed a barrier, and the project's association with the government engendered reluctance on the part of potential contributors. (Barsalou, 2012)

Projects not grounded in existing institutions, resembling internet start-ups, were better positioned to proceed. 18 Days in Egypt is a crowdsourcing project by a group of filmmakers and digital media specialists supported by funding from the Ford Foundation, Sundance Institute, and Tribeca Film Institute. Framed as a "collaborative documentary project," 18 Days underwent substantial changes in its display and collecting platform. It currently offers thematic slide shows displaying the photographs, videos, Twitter feeds, and other material from contributors, who could upload material about the story they wanted to tell via the site, or who were assisted in doing so by project fellows operating throughout Egypt. The project's goal has been evolving as well, having started as an intended collecting portal for the creation of a single documentary film. (Elayat, 2013)

Other documentation entities have embraced much more explicitly political goals. Mosireen was formed by a group of filmmakers in early 2011 to provide online access to videos taken by participants in the revolution, and to train and equip citizens to continue make their own films. Mosireen's mission extends beyond preserving and making accessible the more than ten terabytes of footage it has collected, to producing video pieces "that support protest, that support the demands of the revolution." As one of their associates noted at a 2012 panel discussion, "we don't pretend to be objective, we have a position that what is happening in the revolution is something that we need to support."

Qomra.org, launched later than most other projects, is notable for its geospatial presentation: photographs or videos contributed by members of the public are plotted on an interactive map where events related to the revolution took place. At these physical locations, Qomra has mounted QR code stickers, so that passers-by can use a mobile phone to link to an image of an event that took place there. The initiative envisions the assemblage of user-generated documentation as a means toward a more political end: educating citizens and serving as a platform for debate. (Aboulfotoh, 2013)

As the description of these projects indicates, substantial effort has gone into preserving and making accessible documentary evidence of the January 25 revolution and its aftermath. The various initiatives fill particular niches in terms of their methods and technical platforms, scope, and goals. While University on the Square: Documenting Egypt's 21st Century Revolution has its basis in using the American University in Cairo community as a lens through which to view the revolution, inviting contributions from a wider pool of people in Egypt has expanded the project's reach. This has been extended further by hosting content collected for outside documentation efforts, such as interviews conducted by a college oral history class visiting Egypt from the USA, and a California scholar's collection of images and recorded testimonies from revolution-inspired graffiti artists.

The University on the Square's 250 oral history interview recordings, more than 5,000 digital photographs, 300 videos, 1000 documents and artifacts, and numerous websites and scholarly contributions, will be made available online via the digital library of AUC's Rare Books and Special Collections Library, where much is already accessible. Users from within and outside AUC have made use of the materials for purposes such as conference presentations, displays and exhibitions, dissertation research, university outreach, and various kinds of articles. In these ways, the project plays a role in ensuring that this critical period in Egypt's history is documented for future generations.

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