One of the most dramatic and recent innovations in liberation technology has been the combination of “geomapping” with other new communications technologies, allowing citizens to document crises, corruption, and abuses around the world. In this chapter, I examine one such geomapping liberation technology, Ushahidi, and discuss its role in Egypt’s 2010 parliamentary elections.

Ushahidi (meaning “testimony” in Swahili) is a simple web-based mapping platform originally designed to map reports of human-rights abuses using text messages (SMS), e-mails, and information submitted via an online form. The first Ushahidi map was created to show Kenya’s postelection violence in January 2008. Bloggers in Kenya and from the Kenyan diaspora launched the platform to map human-rights violations that would otherwise have gone completely undocumented by the mainstream media and official election observers. Ushahidi Inc., a nonprofit technology company, was created several months after the elections to improve the mapping platform and make it free and open-source and thus widely usable. Several subsequent versions of the platform have since been used to create more than ten-thousand live maps in more than 140 countries. Those engaged in these mapping projects have included humanitarian and human-rights organizations, media companies, civil society groups, political and environmental activists, and distributed volunteer networks. The Ushahidi platform saw particular use as a “liberation technology” in Egypt during the country’s parliamentary elections in the fall of 2010.
Why focus on Ushahidi? The platform represents an important convergence of new technologies. SMS, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, smartphone apps, voicemail, and email can all be combined with Ushahidi. Examining Ushahidi instead of studying the impact of certain tweets or YouTube videos in isolation allows for a focus on broader multimedia content. Focusing on the Ushahidi platform also facilitates the study of concrete uses of social media, such as election monitoring. Elsewhere in this volume, Larry Diamond has referred to the Ushahidi platform as an example of a liberation and accountability technology. What is missing, however, is research to support these claims.

Using ICTs in Nonpermissive Environments

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are used in various ways and with varying degrees of success to promote democracy, development, rule of law, and transparency in nonpermissive environments. The 2011 revolutions in North Africa and the Middle East represent the most striking recent uses of ICTs to drive political change in repressive environments. But ICTs have also been used to monitor and address issues related to corruption, unemployment, elections, public health, and local governance in dozens of countries around the world.

Mobile-communication technology has been the most rapidly adopted technology in history, far outpacing adoption rates of other technologies, even the Internet. The latest statistics from the International Telecommunications Union counted more than five-billion mobile phones worldwide at the end of 2010, a 25 percent increase over just the previous year. Half a billion people worldwide now access the Internet by mobile phone, and it is estimated that this number will double by 2015. By the end of the decade, some expect the number of mobile wireless devices to pass 50 billion, a staggering tenfold increase. The technology-adoption statistics for Africa are equally astounding, with users of mobile-communication technology soaring from 2 percent to nearly 30 percent of the population in the first decade of this century.

New ICTs are radically different from traditional communication tools. Radio and television have been owned and controlled by the very few, and the telephone and telegraph did not have broadcasting capabilities. By contrast, the majority of content created and shared online today is generated by a vast multiplicity of users, allowing the many to converse with the many without undue centralization and control. The scaling of these conversations is where some believe their power lies, since access to conversations is more important politically than access to information.

The use of ICTs figured prominently during the 2011 revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt. As one Egyptian activist tweeted, “We use Facebook to schedule our protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to
tell the world.” These social-media tools are not simply used in the same way as older technologies to coordinate and document unfolding events; instead, they are increasingly used to create live maps. Dozens of live maps were created to monitor the events in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, and Yemen, for example. Indeed, we are starting to witness the rise of a “mapping reflex.” As one Russian blogger puts it: “If radio gave each event a sound, TV an image, then this relatively new ‘mapping reflex’ gave each event a geographic location.” In many ways, this mapping reflex resembles the “Wikipedia effect”—the creation and real-time editing of Wikipedia entries to document live breaking news. In the case of the Ushahidi platform, contributors edit a map instead of a wiki.

Social media also played a pivotal role during the Libya crisis in 2011. Indeed, Luis Moreno-Ocampo, the International Criminal Court (ICC) prosecutor, cited Facebook and other social media as a key influence on the ICC’s decision to take action in Libya. In addition, the UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) launched a live social-media map of Libya (using the Ushahidi platform) to better inform its humanitarian-relief operations. This map was largely based on reports that were crowdsourced (gathered from the public) through social-media sources like Twitter and YouTube.

Official election-monitoring organizations are also looking to ICTs to improve the speed and reliability of their efforts, particularly in contested elections. The National Democratic Institute (NDI) increasingly uses SMS to monitor elections. Indeed, as Ian Schuler, senior manager of ICT programs at NDI, writes, “the speed of communication and processing, the flexibility, and the coverage SMS can provide give monitoring organizations a powerful tool for organizing volunteers and responding instantly to an evolving election environment.”

Ushahidi Technology and Its Applications

In the wake of Kenya’s controversial national elections on 27 December 2007—which were widely seen as riddled with fraud—deadly riots erupted, claiming eight-hundred lives within a few weeks. President Mwai Kibaki downplayed the scope of the violence and placed restrictions on the national media’s coverage of it. At the same time, international election-monitoring organizations refused to share the data they had collected. The full extent of the violence was largely unknown.

Against this backdrop, Kenya’s most prominent blogger, Ory Okolloh, began blogging extensively about the violence. Having a wide readership, she received continuous streams of information from her readers, who were documenting numerous human-rights violations across the country. Okolloh was soon overwhelmed with the volume of information and could not keep blogging fast enough. She was later forced to flee to South Africa following a number of death threats. As Okolloh
continued blogging from Johannesburg, she suggested in a blog post that a Google map “mashup” be set up to allow others to document human-rights violations directly, since she could not keep up. Fellow Africa and technology bloggers Erik Hersman, David Kobia, and Juliana Rotich read the post and decided to act on her suggestion. Thus was born Ushahidi.

The Ushahidi platform is a free and open-source mapping software that allows anyone to create a live and rich multimedia map of an event or situation. Unlike the standard Google Maps, the Ushahidi platform allowed witnesses in Kenya to text in their reports of human-rights violations using SMS. A simple SMS “short code” was set up with the telecommunications company Safaricom to make this happen. The bloggers shared the map on their blogs to get the word out and thus began to crowdsource crisis information. They documented information on human-rights violations that would otherwise have gone largely unnoticed by mainstream media and election-monitoring organizations.

The Ushahidi software has gone through several important upgrades over the past three years. The platform can now be integrated with SMS, Twitter, e-mail, voicemail, Facebook, and soon Flickr and YouTube. Ushahidi Inc. has also developed dedicated smartphone apps for the platform. These are freely available for the iPhone, Android, and other java-enabled phones. In 2010, the company released Ushahidi 2.0, which allows third-party developers to develop customized apps or plug-ins for the core platform, thereby extending the platform’s capabilities considerably. This latest version of Ushahidi makes it easier to map multimedia content such as photographic evidence and video footage. In addition, Ushahidi recently launched Crowdmap, a hosted version of the Ushahidi platform that further reduces the barriers to creating live maps.

The Ushahidi platform has been deployed in over forty countries for a wide range of uses, including election observation, human-rights monitoring, disaster response, civil resistance, and environmental-impact reporting. For example, civil society groups have used the platform to observe elections in Afghanistan, Burundi, Egypt, India, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, the Philippines, Mexico, Mozambique, Sudan, and Tanzania. Ushahidi has also been used for disaster response and human-rights monitoring in Australia, Chile, the Czech Republic, Haiti, Pakistan, Poland, South Africa, Tunisia, and the United States, and to map the protests that unfolded during the recent revolutions in North Africa.

The impact of Ushahidi platforms, however, has been unclear. Very few evaluations—let alone rigorous ones—have been carried out. Several groups that have used the Ushahidi platform claim that its impact is obvious. But the evidence remains largely anecdotal and the analysis rather thin.

Egypt was selected as a country case study for this chapter for three reasons. First, the Ushahidi platform has been used multiple times in
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Egypt since the 2010 parliamentary elections. Thus, insights can also be drawn from more recent examples, such as the protests during the 2011 revolutions in North Africa. Second, Egypt under Hosni Mubarak qualified as a repressive state—an important criterion given this book’s focus on liberation technology in authoritarian contexts. Third, the Egyptian group that has repeatedly deployed the Ushahidi platform is continuing to do so, not only in Egypt but now also in Lebanon, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen. Hence, interested scholars and practitioners will be able to draw on the findings from this chapter to inform future research on and applications of the technology in Egypt and beyond.

The U-Shahid (shahid means “witness” in Arabic) project in Egypt—run by the Development and Institutionalization Support Center (DISC), an Egyptian organization based in Cairo—first used Ushahidi during parliamentary elections in November and December 2010. Just days after Internet access was restored during the civil-resistance movement in early 2011, DISC used the platform again to map the protests against the Mubarak regime and its human-rights abuses. The Egyptian group has since launched a Ushahidi platform to map feedback on constitutional amendments, and it plans to use Ushahidi to map corruption as well. A separate Cairo-based group also began using the Ushahidi platform in 2010 for a project called Harassmap, which enables Egyptian women to report cases of harassment and increase the visibility of this chronic problem.

The Use of Ushahidi in Egypt

Until recently, Egyptians had only been able to approve or reject a presidential candidate appointed by the parliament, which was dominated by Mubarak’s National Democratic Party (NDP).11 Not surprisingly, the media landscape in Egypt was mostly controlled by the establishment during this time. A constitutional amendment approved in a 2005 referendum paved the way for multiparty presidential elections, and Egyptian youth became more and more interested in having a voice and an active part in the political discourse in their country.

The Ministry of Interior was well aware of these changes in political activism, especially with respect to the use of social networks. It took steps to level the social media battlefield by adopting a strategy similar to that of digital activists. On 1 July 2010, the ministry reportedly established a special department of fifteen individuals who took shifts in order to operate 24 hours a day.12 Their main task was to monitor Facebook content such as groups, pages, and chats and to publish reports countering online criticism of President Mubarak and his son Gamal. In addition, the NDP recruited groups of young people to create Facebook pages and groups to support the president, his son, and the ruling party.

In this political and social-media context, DISC used the Ushahidi
platform to launch their U-Shahid project. The head of DISC, Kamal Nabil, had first come across Ushahidi during training in Washington, D.C., organized by Freedom House in early 2010. The goal of the U-Shahid project was to monitor the parliamentary elections in late 2010. This independent initiative became particularly important when the Mubarak regime announced that it would not permit any official international election-monitoring groups into the country. Despite the pessimism and despair about the political situation in Egypt, “the undercurrent of digital activism was tangible,” according to a foreign activist who joined DISC. The use of social media and Facebook in particular increasingly enabled the youth to engage in a political context in which the physical elimination of the opposition was the norm. Blogs and Facebook groups filled the vacuum created by the lack of a real political debate in Egypt, and they increasingly emerged as an alternative political scene where a discourse on democracy and human rights was still possible.

The U-Shahid project was rather simple on paper—use the Ushahidi platform to monitor the elections by allowing people to send SMS, tweets, Facebook comments, voicemail, e-mail, and reports via web-form to the live map. DISC decided to draw on both crowdsourced reporting and “blogger-sourced” information. This meant navigating the restrictions imposed by Egyptian national-security officials, while getting the word out to the wider public and training a large network of 130 trusted bloggers across the country. Despite the restrictions, training for the latter took place in five major cities: Cairo, Alexandria, Assiut, Mansoura, and Port Said. DISC translated its Ushahidi platform entirely into Arabic, since the U-Shahid project was meant to be “an Egyptian project for Egyptians,” as one blogger stated. Egyptian software developers integrated Twitter, Flickr, and YouTube with Ushahidi. Since Facebook was and continues to be an important platform for Egyptian youths, the group also created a feature to enable comments on a Facebook wall to be easily mapped on the Ushahidi platform.

DISC formulated clear goals for U-Shahid. The first was to help Egyptian citizens and international observers learn more about the electoral process. Second, the project aimed to report and seek redress when electoral laws were violated. Third, DISC sought to raise awareness about citizen rights and the importance of participation in the electoral process. Finally, DISC wanted to use the U-Shahid project to empower local partners to advocate for closer adherence to electoral laws and fair practices during both the campaign and election period.

How did the team do? During the elections, DISC sources mapped 2,700 reports, which included 211 supporting pictures and 323 videos. The team of Egyptian bloggers was also able to verify more than 90 percent of the content that ended up on the map by using basic journalistic techniques such as triangulation and follow-up. Most of the “crowd-sourced” information, however, came from the preestablished network
of trusted bloggers, and thus did not require immediate verification. In total, the web-based map received over 40,000 hits, the vast majority of which came from within Egypt. (Interestingly, the next highest number originated from Saudi Arabia, with just under 5,000 hits.) The group proactively disseminated this information, through both new and traditional media. Their efforts were featured on Egyptian television, on BBC Arabic, and in dozens of articles in ten different languages.

Even before it was formally launched, the project got the attention of the Egyptian government. An Egyptian state security official contacted Kamal Nabil and told him that his name was recurring “too often” in phone conversations between activists. The Ministry of Interior subsequently shadowed the project in different ways: by tapping the cell phones of the core team of bloggers; by requesting copies of the agendas for all meetings related to U-Shahid; and by requiring that a list of all individuals trained in the use of the platform be submitted to them. Email addresses, Facebook pages, and Twitter accounts of the core team were reportedly all under surveillance from the start of the project, and the Ministry of Interior openly asked Nabil what his reaction would be if they were to shut down the U-Shahid project before the elections.

Moreover, several new Facebook groups were launched to attack the core team by accusing its members of being affiliated with the United States, on the grounds that they had participated in the Freedom House–organized conference in Washington, D.C., earlier that year. Some of those Facebook groups called on young Egyptians to “watch out” for projects that could endanger the political independence and integrity of the country. Activists reacted to these attacks by waging a virtual battle. Once a government-supported group was identified, dozens of activists would write on the group’s wall, basically occupying the entire wall with contrary opinions.

DISC was well aware that technology alone would not change the political situation in Egypt. They also knew that Egyptian state security could shut down the project and block access to the website whenever it wanted. Furthermore, everyone involved in the project knew full well that their involvement in U-Shahid could get them arrested. At the end of a training workshop in Cairo, one participant told a trainer, “You know, we may all end up in jail, but before this I thought there was no hope to change anything. Now I can even dare to think it is worth a try.”

The impact of the U-Shahid project on the political space in Egypt is difficult to assess. According to the lead trainer of the project, more than 1,500 election complaints were officially submitted to the courts. It is unclear, however, whether any of these came from or were influenced by the content mapped on the Ushahidi platform. Even overlap between U-Shahid’s 2,700 reports and the courts’ 1,500 would highlight the value of the project, since the latter’s data could be used to
triangulate or bolster evidence submitted to the courts. Unfortunately, accessing the complaints received by the court has not been possible. Instead, the reports submitted to the Ushahidi platform during the parliamentary elections and civil resistance were analyzed to assess the potential impact of the project and identify trends or recurring patterns in the reports.

The topics most frequently addressed in reports submitted to the Ushahidi platform included bribes for votes, police closure of roads leading to polling centers, the destruction and falsification of election ballots, evidence of violence in specific locations, the closure of polling centers before the official time, and the banning of local election observers from polling centers. Perhaps most striking about the reports, however, is how specific they were in terms of location and details. For example, reports that documented the buying of votes often included the amount paid for the vote. Other reports documented nonfinancial bribes, including mobile phones, food, gas, and even “sex stimulators,” “Viagra,” and “Tramadol tablets.”

Additional incidents mapped on the Ushahidi platform included reports of deliberate power cuts to prevent people from voting. One voter complained that “in Al Saaida Zaniab election center we could not find my name in voters’ lists, [even though] I voted in the same committee. Nobody helped to find my name on [the] list because the electricity cut out.” Voters also complained about the lack of phosphoric ink for voting and the fact that they were not asked for their IDs to vote. Reports also documented harassment and violence by thugs, often against Muslim Brotherhood candidates, and the busing in of people from the ruling party. For example, one report noted that “Oil Minister Samih Fahmi, who is a national nominee for Peoples Council in Al Nassr City, used his power to mobilize employees to vote for him. The employees used the company’s buses, which carried the nominee’s pictures, to go to the election centers.” Several hundred reports included pictures and videos, some clearly documenting obvious election fraud. There were also some reports, however, that documented calm (e.g. “everything is ok”) at certain voting centers.

The evidence documented by the U-Shahid team had the potential to create greater political accountability by shining more light on the process of election fraud. It is doubtful, however, that the U-Shahid project actually deterred fraud. The project was simply not operating at a scale of visibility sufficient to change behavior. Documenting 2,700 instances of election irregularities is impressive given the many challenges of operating in a repressive environment and the fact that this was the first use of the Ushahidi platform in Egypt. But it might have required 270,000 reports documenting all facets of the election—before, during, and after—with tens of thousands of original videos and photographic evidence to deter those planning to commit fraud. While the
2,700 reports mapped on U-Shahid came from more than 100 individuals, this too was insufficient to have a large-scale and long-term impact. If 100,000 people or more had participated in sending in reports, this might have reached the scale at which the U-Shahid project could have had more meaningful impact.

**What the Activists Say**

According to members of the U-Shahid project, the use of Ushahidi increased civic participation in election observation, primarily because the web-based nature of the platform allowed for ideas to be more easily expressed online. The Ushahidi platform provided an easy and public way for ordinary Egyptians to share what they were witnessing—fraud, violence, and the like. One activist noted that the technology allowed more people to “make small, low-risk contributions, like sending SMS or an email.”

The lead trainer for the project explained that, in the past, “NGOs had been more visibly involved in election monitoring, which made it more dangerous, and observers had to be accredited by formal organizations. But with Ushahidi, anyone could report, even if they had never been observers before. They didn’t have to register.” In addition, the training sessions did not require technological savvy and instead were focused on political conversations and participation.

When asked why the regime had not shut down the Ushahidi platform, one blogger explained that “many of the activists who began using Ushahidi had many followers on Facebook and Twitter; they also had the attention of the international media, which could draw unwanted attention to the regime’s actions. They were connected with people in the U.S. Congress, directors of international human-rights NGOs, and so on.” This explanation is in line with Philip Howard’s finding that “having an online civil society is a key ingredient of the causal recipe for democratization.”

Interviewees also noted that the Mubarak regime had a limited understanding of technology, and therefore the relationship between the state and DISC did not necessarily become more contentious over time. As one key person at DISC noted, “They [government officials] didn’t quite understand the technology and were afraid of the Ushahidi platform.” Another activist added that “the government was nervous; they didn’t feel in control. And the government is usually behind anyways, they’re not in the driver’s seat [when it comes to technology].” Another reason why the relationship did not become more contentious is because DISC remained fully transparent about the project. “We stressed the technical aspect of the project, and remained fully open and transparent about our work. We gave Egyptian National Security a dedicated username and password [to access the Ushahidi platform], one that we could control.
and [thus use to] monitor [their actions]. This gave them a false sense of control; we could restore anything they deleted.”

In terms of organizational issues, the team was able to leverage existing networks of activists and remain flexible. As noted in one interview, the Egyptian state’s hierarchical organization made it less effective in responding quickly to a changing situation, while activists could do so almost in real time since their lines of command were far more diffuse than the government’s. One activist remarked that government officials “don’t understand how we work; we can learn very fast, but the government has many rules and processes. They have to write up reports, submit them for approval, and allocate funding to acquire technology. But for us, we don’t need permission. If we want to use Tor, we simply use Tor.” As another activist explained:

The government had two mechanisms at its disposal to get in our way: intimidation and bribes. But to influence these two mechanisms, you have to access the leadership, and with technology, this connection is a lot harder to make; it becomes more about distributed [rather than hierarchical] leadership. The government couldn’t just target one person [i.e., the director of DISC] to shut down the project—they had to target 100. This gave a sense of empowerment to the people.

When asked whether the Ushahidi platform led to more or less access to the political system in Egypt, all interviewees answered “more access.” One activist explained that members of the U-Shahid project “were some of the most interviewed people on TV, [which] gave us access to the government and the public; we also had a lot more access to more candidates who wanted to have their representatives trained on the Ushahidi platform . . . and were also invited to train journalists . . . . We also got access to other international organizations that promoted our initiative.” Another activist argued that the use of the Ushahidi platform “created more transparency around the elections, allowing easier access than in any previous election.” When asked whether any of the 2,700 reports submitted to the Ushahidi platform had made their way to the courts, however, activists replied that it was difficult to know for sure.

According to some participating bloggers, there was a sense that doing anything more than resorting to online tools would lead to physical harm. While activists may have felt safer organizing online than in person, they did face some “opportunity costs” in using the Ushahidi platform. “We were afraid that the government would be filtering reports coming to us and that they would track the reports back to the people who sent them,” one activist noted. Another added that this fear might have dissuaded some people from submitting evidence. The lead trainer said, “Yes, definitely, we faced some serious constraints. For example, very few people sent in reports via SMS—at most one percent of the
reports we received. One reason for this was that everyone knew that the
government could track and control SMS.”

In addition, the “timely compilation of reports made a huge differ-
ence. In the past, covering elections would mean the media giving quick
superficial updates, or established organizations giving a comprehen-
sive bigger picture, but only much later. With Ushahidi, you have the
big picture immediately.” As the lead trainer for the project noted, “We
had never seen so many videos on YouTube about the elections. It was
simply the right time [to do a project like U-Shahid]. . . . The Usha-
hidi platform definitely helped contribute to this significant increase [in
user-generated content around the elections].”

On a related note, an activist explained that the U-Shahid project was
able to
cover a lot more information than the traditional media; while they had
their own coverage, we provided more timely information, which is very
important for the media. We gave them evidence: pictures, videos, and
statistics. The media doesn’t have access to all this kind of information,
so the reports on the Ushahidi platform were a treasure for them. Even if
the government was trying to pressure the media, the information was too
valuable for them not to show it.

In a way, the information displayed on the Ushahidi platform not only
circumvented the state media, but also coopted some national media
outlets.

Finally, the launch of U-Shahid inspired some “copycats,” as four
additional Ushahidi platforms sprang up shortly before the elections,
including one launched by the Muslim Brotherhood to document ha-
rassment of their candidates. This proliferation of Ushahidi platforms
helped to frame an alternative discourse during the election period.

All the interviewees stated that the regime was not particularly ef-
eective in using technology to foster patriotism. “If they had been, they
would have stopped the revolution,” one blogger noted. That said, one
activist remarked that the government did try:

They had an army of bloggers who would go to activist websites to lobby
them and to report them so they would have their Facebook pages sus-
pended. They also tried to do that with some websites, but we had a secure
system. There were attempts by the government to overload our website
with many fake reports . . . but we were on it and we were able to delete
them. This happened for a minute or two every three hours or so—attacks,
overload—but eventually they gave up.

Egyptian activists believe that the Ushahidi technology is notably
different from ICTs that they have used to organize and mobilize in the
past. One activist recalled that an election-monitoring NGO had used a
map to monitor previous elections, but the resulting website had a page
rank of six million, even though the NGO had paid staff thousands of dollars to create the web-based map. “The map was not easy to use or to browse,” the activist said. “The people behind the map were professionals at election monitoring, but they were not professionals in technology.” In contrast, the Ushahidi map for the U-Shahid project “had a 40,000 ranking worldwide. Plus it was open source and reached tens of thousands of people.”

Regarding the cat-and-mouse game between the state and the civil society movements, one activist said,

We did a lot of scenario building, considered many ‘what if’ situations. The fact that we were so well prepared is why [the regime] could not touch us. We tried to connect all the data on Facebook and Twitter so that if they closed our Ushahidi map, we would move to a new domain name and let all our followers know. We also had a large database of SMS numbers, which would allow us to text our followers with information on the new website.

Another blogger noted that “because we were well prepared, we knew they could not arrest all of us on the day of the election, and just in case, we trained a group in Lebanon who could take over all operations if we were stopped.” The team also set up a phone tree in case of arrest and made multiple copies of the platform.

Another key activist observed:

Technology by nature is a very neutral tool. But the most important thing is information. Information is the key that drives political discourse and media debates. Information wants to be found. Those who want to suppress it will have a harder time. So people in favor of spreading information are going to win.

The lead trainer of the project opined that “regardless of technology, numbers still matter, and there will always be more citizens than politicians. So I believe in the power of numbers and organization.”

**Was U-Shahid Successful?**

The activists behind U-Shahid set out to achieve concrete goals: to inform Egyptians and international observers about the electoral process, to expose and remedy election violations, to raise awareness about citizens’ rights and the importance of electoral participation, and to empower local partners to advocate for fair and clean election practices.

Did they have the impact that they intended? Largely yes, according to those interviewed. They were able to publish and widely disseminate the electoral laws of Egypt, the Egyptian constitution, applicable human-rights conventions, and up-to-date news on the electoral process.
and campaign. They received some 40,000 hits on their dedicated map, leveraged the web through Facebook, Twitter, and blogs, and received a notable amount of national and international media coverage. They mapped 2,700 reports, with more than 90 percent of them verified. But the project also fell short of achieving some of its goals. In terms of the 1,500 cases of reported electoral violations submitted to the Egyptian courts, the lead trainer for the project noted that they “don’t know if those violation complaints are related to the use of this [U-Shahid] platform, or what impact the platform has or will have, in any of those cases.” In addition, the group was unable to involve certain sectors of society in the project and to overcome all the technical and political barriers. Finally, the lead trainer stated that “We weren’t able to set measurable outcomes for the impact of the project in terms of change . . . but we have time to get better.”

The U-Shahid project had some impact on the political space and discourse in Egypt. The use of free and open-source technology meant that DISC faced lower costs, while the use of Facebook, Twitter, and other social-networking platforms also helped to shape a sense of collective identity (although this community largely existed before the elections). A leading Egyptian activist remarked that thanks to its free and open-source technology, as well as its distributed, user-generated approach, the U-Shahid project was less costly than traditional election monitoring. The group was able to generate and to verify the vast majority of reports they mapped on the Ushahidi platform. In addition, the findings from the interviews clearly show how adept DISC was at adopting new tactics in order to manage its relationship with the state. In addition, content analysis of the 2,700 reports demonstrates the high level of transparency that the project was able to achieve during the country’s parliamentary elections.

The project did not significantly worsen DISC’s contentious relationship with the state, although activists explained that this was due to the government being worried about possible blowback if it did crack down on the U-Shahid team. The group’s connections with international allies were important, and the state could not rely on public international support for rigged elections. Despite this, the impact of Ushahidi technology on the behavior of ruling elites is less clear. As the content analysis reveals, elites did not appear to succeed in manipulating U-Shahid’s independent monitoring of the elections. In terms of state capacity for repression, it is also unclear what impact the Ushahidi platform might have had. As for impact on political accessibility, the U-Shahid project had a strong positive influence, according to findings from the interviews.

The Ushahidi platform allowed DISC to circumvent state media and generate international media coverage. Meanwhile, the Egyptian regime was unable to successfully generate patriotism using social media, since
it did not know how best to leverage the new media. As one activist explained “Using technology provides a comparative advantage in many ways. It makes you stand out [and] gets you lots of media coverage, free publicity. Everyone was interested in what we were doing, even political candidates and other NGOs who wanted to share their reports with us.”

The state was largely unable to counter the alternative frames presented by U-Shahid.

The U-Shahid project had some democratic impact on the political space and discourse in Egypt. It operated on such a small scale, however, that it is doubtful that the U-Shahid project actually succeeded in deterring election fraud in 2010. The documentation of 2,700 instances of election irregularities was impressive, but only a vastly greater number of reports could have deterred fraud.

Yet the fact that Egyptian national security was closely monitoring DISC’s operations reveals that the state was concerned and treated the project as a potential political threat. The regime refrained from shutting down the project for fear of blowback. Following the fall of Mubarak in 2011, protestors stormed the offices of Egyptian national security. In the files, they found a security report on the U-Shahid project with the names and contact information (including Skype usernames) of many activists, both Egyptian and foreign, who were involved in using the Ushahidi platform.

In many ways, U-Shahid helped to reverse or at least fight back against this government-constructed panopticon, and this may have helped to pave the way for the 2011 revolution that toppled Mubarak. The Egyptian case demonstrates the value of geomapping as an important liberation technology. As John Yemma wrote:

In Tom Stoppard’s 1978 play Night and Day, a photojournalist in Africa notes how important it is to be able to see into dark places. ‘People do awful things to each other. But it is worse in places where everybody is kept in the dark. Information is light. Information, in itself, about anything, is light.’

NOTES


8. A public version of this map was later made available at LibyaCrisisMap.net.


11. An earlier version of some of the following paragraphs was coauthored with Anahi Ayala Iacucci for the previous version of this paper, presented at the conference on “Liberation Technology in Authoritarian Regimes,” Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law, Stanford University, 11–12 October 2010.

12. Unless otherwise indicated, all other quotations are from the author’s interviews.
