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Beyond the Book

A podcast series on the business of writing and publishing

Interview with Mona Eltahawy

Recorded at [We Media NYC](#)

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Q: As popular uprisings have spread across the Middle East and North Africa, media pundits have credited Twitter and Facebook. But one Egyptian-born journalist based in New York says the acclaim for social media is misplaced, even though she admits to a Twitter addiction herself. Welcome to *Beyond the Book*, everyone. My name is Chris Kenneally, and joining me right now is journalist and Twitter fanatic, Mona Eltahawy. Mona, salam alaikum.

A: Alaikum salam, thanks for having me.

Q: It's a pleasure to see you here at this We Media conference. We just heard you talk about your experiences as a journalist, as a Twitter addict. But I want to start with a question that's based on my own experience, having been in Cairo as a journalist, and I can close my eyes and I can see Tahrir Square. I know how important, historically, that place – that physical place – was for Egyptians, and what to me, what happened in the revolution was that Twitter and Facebook and these other tools allowed that Square to be extended. It became a virtual place as well as a physical place. Would you agree? And tell me about your own thoughts in terms of why you would say that this is not a Twitter revolution.

A: I wouldn't call this a Twitter or a social media revolution because I think in doing so, you take away agency from the people on the ground, whose incredible courage was what fueled these revolutions. I think what social media did was that social media connected real life activists with online activists, and with ordinary Egyptians whose only exposure to politics came through Facebook and through tweets that they read. And through that connection, it brought people out on the ground. But it was a tool. It was a weapon. It was a tool in the way that the printing press was a tool during the time of Martin Luther, when he used it to put up his list of demands on the church door for the reformation. It was a tool in the way that Ayatollah Khomeini would record cassette tapes and send them to Paris in the run-up to the revolution in Iran in 1979. So the revolution in Iran would have happened, the Reformation back in Germany would have happened, and the revolution in Egypt would have happened whether we had social media or not. But what social media did was again, they connected people, and they helped amplify that courage because it's a revolution of courage rather than a revolution of Twitter or Facebook.



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Q: Right. And you were able to, in turn, amplify it for the world. You're Egyptian-born, but you are based here in New York City. And tell us about how you came to be a Twitter addict on this very subject, which is, generally speaking, about the popular uprisings around the Middle East and North Africa.

A: Well, I originally joined Twitter in 2009 to join activists I knew who were live tweeting very serious and important events, like one Palestinian journalist who was caught in Cairo airport and prevented from going home to Gaza. And an Egyptian online activist who is known for posting torture videos of police brutality online, and who, himself, became a victim of police brutality.

So when the uprisings and revolutions began with Tunisia at the end of 2010, Twitter and Facebook basically helped connect me to these incredibly courageous people on the ground, and they began to serve as my ears and eyes on the ground, and I became the connector, so that through me, other people could see through these eyes and hear through these ears on the ground. And so I would follow people that I learned to trust, and then people who learned to trust me would follow them, in turn, and it became kind of this widening circle of influence that was growing and growing. And it was incredibly satisfying to me because what Twitter and Facebook did do was that it allowed people in the region to own the narrative of their story. These are people who were always written about, but now they were talking to the rest of the world about how they felt and why it was important for them to overthrow the regime. So it was about empowerment and owning the narrative.

Q: Right. It's fascinating because you said in your presentation you wanted to be a journalist since you were in high school, probably. But you've made some interesting decisions about the kind of journalism you have wanted to pursue. Tell us about that. I mean, you made a very critical decision not to work for the State-controlled media in Egypt. What have all those decisions kind of led you to, and why did you decide – you were mentioning the power of Twitter, but you self-identify, almost, now as a Twitter journalist. Tell us about that journey.

A: I think what's been at the heart of my journey with journalism is this need, and a passion and an obsession with independence. Because when I first became a journalist – I've wanted to be a journalist since I was 16, and when I first started as a freelance journalist in Egypt when I was about 20, 21, I made a decision not to work for State-owned media in Egypt because not only would I be subject to State censorship, but I would have to learn self-censorship which to me is much more damaging because it's very difficult to undo this ability to censor yourself. So that was one of the kind of the steps towards independence.

And then when I moved to the U.S. after 10 years as a news reporter in the Middle East, mostly for Reuters, when I moved to the U.S., the next major decision came very soon after 9/11, when I decided that I was done with objectivity. 9/11 killed objectivity for me. So I became an opinion writer because I was determined to kind of marry my own experience with the region and my own experience as a Muslim and as a feminist with what was happening in the world. And again, this idea of owning my narrative, because people were talking and writing about Muslims, but they weren't listening to me as a Muslim, and I wanted to get that Muslim voice out there.

And then the next kind of big decision was to use social media as one of my tools because through Twitter and through Facebook I had access to a whole world of sources out there that could help me basically discover and learn the news much quicker than I would through mainstream media. So I think this is kind of the crystallization of this obsession of independence because on Twitter, now, I'm this independent agent who tries to connect and amplify and own my story. And that's what I'm doing – owning my narrative.

Q: It strikes me that you're an unofficial journalist with unofficial sources. That's a fascinating combination of things, and very powerful at this moment.

In the audience, someone asked you about how can you trust anybody on Twitter, and you had a great response for it. It's not as if you have to simply take it at face value. You can check it out, which is what a journalist does.

A: Absolutely. Just like a journalist would send quotes, for example, to the fact-checking department at *The New Yorker* or whatever, and they would have to call someone up and say, did you really say this, and all this, I can do that on Twitter, because if someone sends me, for example, an alert that a demonstration is being cracked down violently on in, say, Syria or Bahrain, there is a way to check it, because there are other people who will be at the demonstration, there are sources I know in those various countries. So you send out the information and say, has anybody else heard of this? And through your network you will find out who's telling the truth and who isn't.

And reputation and credibility on social media are very important. You can't just go on there and say anything and have everyone believe you. So the fact that I can check it out, the fact that people will respond, then I will get an idea of who this original kind of tweet was, and whether her or his words are to be trusted. And I think this is what speaks to our reputation on social media – your currency, your value is your reputation, and the fact that people follow me says to me that they trust what I have to say, which then puts a bigger onus on me to make sure that I am very sure of what I am re-tweeting. So this really is the way that you establish currency and credibility on Twitter and social media.

Q: And of course you're a frequent traveller between the States and Egypt, I'm sure elsewhere in the region, but Twitter and other technologies allow you to maintain a contact regardless of place, although I'm sure it's still important to be there when you can be.

A: Absolutely. Because I wasn't in Tahrir Square, I was able to follow people that I know from the real world, in Tahrir Square, from the moment they woke up to the moment they went to sleep. I was able to follow friends who lived in South Africa and then decided to take a break from work and return to Egypt because they couldn't be away during this revolution. So it's people I know in the real world and people I got to know through them in the virtual world, but all helping me stay connected to the various worlds that I move in. So it definitely helps to have contacts on the ground and through them, to establish a greater network in the region.

Q: In that region, what's very important for people to know, of course, is the demographic nature. It's a very young area. I'm not sure what the numbers are exactly, but I would imagine something like half the population is under 30 and probably three-quarters is under 20, and so this is something that is not going to end when these regimes end, this is going to continue and evolve.

Any thoughts on where this is taking us for the Middle East and for North Africa, and what it has to teach us here in New York City?

A: Absolutely. Sixty-five percent of the Middle East and North Africa are younger than 30, so that speaks to the demographics and that speaks to the so-called youth vote that we often hear about. And they were instrumental, not just in the uses of social media in their various countries, but instrumental in getting out those feet on the ground and standing up to those various regimes who were all very disconnected from this youthful population, and much, much older than this youthful population.

So I think as we move forward now, we will see this greater empowerment and this idea that I can bring about change and how powerful I am, among this very youthful population in the region. And as we take Egypt, for example, where the Supreme Military Council is in charge during this transitional period, on an almost weekly basis, there are demonstrations, strikes, protests, by some group or other, so it's like this general awakening that young people helped kick-start, but that has a taken a group of all age groups, basically, in the country, and people of different backgrounds, determined to say, you must now hear what I want, and my demands count.



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And I think where it ends up influencing us here in the U.S. is look what happened to Wisconsin, where for unions and for organizing people in Wisconsin in Madison were inspired by what happened in Egypt. When I speak on university campuses here, I like to remind young Americans that their contemporaries, their peers in the Middle East and North Africa are helping fuel revolutions. Because I think a lot of young people in this country have forgotten their own power, this self-power. The Obama campaign was able to reignite that, but I think a lot of them forget. So I think it's important. It's a seismic shift in the way the world looks at young people and in the way that young people look at themselves and their ability to bring about change.

- Q: Well, I know I feel something very powerful when I see the photographs from around the region of these people who have taken it on themselves to overthrow these regimes. It's tremendous courage that's required to do it.
- A: It's breathtaking when you really think about it, because you know, they face tanks, they face the Air Force, they face police brutality, they face water cannons, and in Libya they face mass slaughter by Gaddafi. And in a state like Syria, which many Syrians call the North Korea of the Middle East, but with better food – all these countries where for a long time people outside of the region never imagined that we'd see uprisings and revolutions, but they were people in the region itself that for years have been rising up silently and often without any media attention. And I'm really glad to be alive for this moment where their courage has been validated and their courage has become so infectious and is spreading across the region and finally giving them a voice that everybody hears and a voice that very clearly says, I count and it's time to be free and dignified.
- Q: What more are we going to hear from the voice of Mona Eltahawy? You've got some plans in store?
- A: I want to write a book, finally. I keep threatening. And it's such old-fashioned media, as well. I just want to write a book. (laughter)
- Q: I'm sure once you write the book, you'll go on and develop it further into all sorts of platforms. You're very creative in that way. I want to say, shukran to Mona Eltahawy, joining us here for *Beyond the Book* at the We Media conference in New York. Thank you so much, Mona.
- A: Afwan, Christopher.
- Q: Thank you. OK.

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