

Freedom of Expression

As the revolution surged across Egypt early last year, Ahmed Ragab could be found in Cairo's Tahrir Square live-streaming video, posting images of the protests on Facebook and tweeting about his views of the dramatic events in the country and across the region.

Six months earlier Ragab, an architecture student, had learned many of these social media skills in a series of workshops called Express Yourself and be Free. Delivered by the country's top bloggers through Canada's Rights & Democracy organization and supported by DFAIT, the program trained more than 100 young bloggers, including women and rural Egyptians. They learned the technical, legal, ethical and security aspects of social media, as well as how to connect with mainstream journalists and make public service announcements.

Now Ragab and the others were using their new skills and tools as "citizen journalists" among the crowds, writing on blogs, Twitter and Facebook and passing on their observations, video and photos, both online and through international news organizations.

"Youth took the revolution from Facebook and Twitter to the squares," says Ragab, 22, today an architect who continues to use the Internet to post his political views. "Social media was the main reason the revolution was transferred from Tunisia to Egypt and then the rest of the countries."

The blogger training, financed in part by the Glyn Berry Program for Peace and Security, was given from 2009 to early last year in an effort to support local demand for political reforms in the country, says Annik Lussier Rez, a senior policy analyst at DFAIT in the International Organizations, Human Rights and Democracy Bureau.

Lussier Rez, a former journalist who worked at the *Cairo Times* from 2001 to 2003 through DFAIT's former Young Professionals International program, says the blogosphere in Egypt has grown exponentially. She says it successfully alerted the media to stories that might have otherwise gone unreported.

"Blogging plays an essential role in sharing information that's not otherwise available in semi-authoritarian and authoritarian contexts," says Lussier Rez. "It's incredible to see how fruitful this initiative has been, that a small project may have contributed in some way to change for the better."

The workshops and a "how-to" manual developed through the program bridged bloggers and mainstream journalists and gave women more of a voice, says Tom Cormier, Director of Programs at Rights & Democracy. Social media allowed people to express themselves "under the radar," he says, and was an important organizing tool.

"A number of these bloggers have quite a following," he adds. "They became active participants in the dialogue on the ground. They were part of the storyline."

Canadians played a role in the explosion of social media in the Arab Spring in other ways. DFAIT's Ben Rowswell, while on academic leave as a visiting scholar at Stanford University, last year started Cloud to Street, a project to support Egyptian activists with technology. Rowswell, whose first diplomatic posting was in Egypt as a political officer from 1996 to 1998, had gotten the idea for Cloud to Street from a course in "liberation technology" that he was auditing at Stanford.



Cell phones up: Technology is very much in evidence at a protest in Tahrir Square on April 1, 2011, to "save the revolution."
photo: Farhaan Ladhani



The new face of social media: Trainer Dima Shaheen (at keyboard) helps three women participating in the Cairo blogger workshops with their final projects in January 2011. photo: Rights & Democracy