

# **Egyptian political conversations on Clubhouse: Proto-public sphere at the age of the pandemic**

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## **Abstract:**

Clubhouse is an invitation only social media app where users communicate in real-time audio chat rooms that accommodate up to five thousand users per room. It became popular among Egyptians during the COVID-19 pandemic who actively participated in various discussions – including politics. This exploratory study asks whether the app performed functions that might form the basis for an emerging public sphere in Egypt, filling a gap in society where freedom of expression via traditional media is under state control, through satisfying a need for connectivity during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study first introduces Clubhouse and its uses in Egypt within the context of that nation's politics during 2021, then moves on to conceptualizing the public sphere within the context of the current hypermedia age, identifying the conditions which might allow Clubhouse to cut through in ways other platforms have failed in a range of contexts. The study argues that Clubhouse facilitated the creation of what may appear as a proto-public sphere by facilitating connections between a large number of Egyptian citizens with different political affiliations, and by offering an insight into what issues circulate within Egyptian society. Yet, the app presented structural barriers which limited participation beyond access to technology, and there were limited means for the discussions to have a positive impact on society.

## **KEYWORDS**

public sphere; counterpublic; social media; conflict resolution ; audio-chat rooms

## **INTRODUCTION**

Early works on social media and digital platforms discussed the potential of the worldwide web to expand access to information and influence, performing more closely to key principles of public sphere theory (Dahlgren 2005). Gimpler (2001) in particular highlighted how free and open discourse was a key affordance of digital technologies that could enable more inclusive and deliberative forms of democracy to emerge. However, such high hopes were soon found unrealized. Dahlgren (2005) highlighted how the interactional dimension of public sphere theory was positive for civic culture. However, he questioned the extent political structures and representational relationships would be impacted. For Dahlgren the 'Internet' could be a public sphere, but he questioned its effect on the offline political sphere. Early research did also highlight the importance of dialogue and how exposure to information and discussion, and involvement in deliberation, fostered understanding and consensus formation around civic and political issues (Price and Cappella 2002). Twenty years on, the majority of research has found

that political discourse on digital platforms and social media is characterized to a greater extent by polarization rather than consensus seeking (Lin and Tian 2019). Even within the context of a global pandemic, where digital technologies were used extensively for community organization to counter the challenges of lockdowns (Lilleker et al. 2021), positions on public and health policy adopt a polarized and partisan character within nations that have extant deep political divisions (Jiang et al. 2020). Research, thus, indicates that where discussions touch on controversial, contentious or partisan issues and positions there is limited evidence that dialogue on social media platforms has a deliberative or consensual character. Instead, where we find some conditions of a public sphere met within online political discourse, it is within groups that restrict access, focus on community politics and avoid challenging those in power (Elsheikh and Lilleker 2021).

This article questions whether this has to be the case and explores how online spaces, like Clubhouse, can have a more positive impact on societal cohesion and political consensus building. The use of the Clubhouse app within Egyptian politics appears to have managed to achieve this, as discussions in its rooms have tackled a range of divisive issues and brought erstwhile opponents together to discuss their entrenched divisions while also allowing marginalized groups and issues to surface. The discussions occurred despite official state opposition, appearing to promote a vision of a more inclusive and united Egyptian society able to overcome the bitter divisions that have developed since the 2011 revolution. In focusing on the major themes of discussion, the nature of the dialogue and the framing of participation within Clubhouse in Egypt, we discuss how they map to key principles of a public sphere and attempt to identify the affordances of Clubhouse that facilitate more deliberative forms of discussion. The article first introduces Clubhouse and its uses in the context of Egyptian politics, then moves on to the conceptualization of the public sphere within the context of the current hypermedia age, prior to introducing our thematic analysis and mapping the key observations to our theoretical framework. The analysis shows that Clubhouse, in some ways, these limitations, the app appears to have offered an inclusive space despite the challenges posed by the polarization of Egyptian society.

## **EGYPT: POLARIZATION POST-REVOLUTION**

The Egyptian public sphere is heavily polarized and stagnant due to the events which followed the 2011 revolution. Youth aspirations of ‘bread, freedom and social justice’ were dampened amid the heavily polarized 2012 presidential elections (Elsheikh 2018). The victory of Muslim Brotherhood’s presidential candidate Mohamed Morsi divided Egypt into two camps: Islamists and non-Islamists. Morsi lasted one year in power before being ousted in a military coup in support of anti-Morsi mass protests in 2013. The army proceeded to round up and intimidate Morsi supporters, paving the way for retired general Abdel Al-Sisi to be elected president in 2014. The polarization occurred also because as many Muslim Brotherhood members were imprisoned or fled abroad. Human Rights Watch estimated the numbers of political prisoners exceeded 60,000 (Shenker 2021), a figure contested by Egyptian authorities. Debate was stifled due to state attempts to limit political activism and buying up and controlling media companies (El-Issawi 2020). These tactics have resulted in there being almost no accessible platforms for activism or opposition. Hence, for some, Clubhouse resembled the stone that was thrown into the stagnant water, allowing meetings and discussions that could have never happened in the actual public sphere. However, could this help to reduce the broader stagnation of debate and provide the basis for a public sphere, and if so, what should this look like?

## **THE PUBLIC SPHERE AND PROTO-PUBLIC SPHERES**

The public sphere is a highly contested concept that, some argue, to be relevant only to a particular historical context. However, the core habermasian (1989) principles, adjusted for the modern information environment, prove useful when considering the role of communicative platforms within societies. The basic notion of a public sphere is a space where private individuals come together and discuss subjects of public concern or common interest to develop solutions. Due to its historical origins, identifying the influential role of the bourgeois industrial classes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the theory has been criticized as emphasizing the influence of a narrow and privileged white male elite (Foss and Foss 1991) and so failing to recognize the position of politically or economically marginalized in society (Fraser 1990; Eley 1992; Elsheikh and Lilleker 2021). Fraser in particular popularized four criticisms of the habermasian concept: its exclusion of women and other marginalized groups in society, the inequality of access and dominance of the ideology of the majority, the problematic definition of public vs private matters, and its hegemony over 'weak publics' through shaping mass opinions rather than facilitating mass participation in decision making (1990). The more inclusive and non-hierarchical nature of social media has been argued to overcome some of these weaknesses and allowed a reconceptualization of the public sphere for the digital age (Elsheikh and Lilleker 2021).

The open access to information, pluralism and facilitation of horizontal interaction via digital platforms have been viewed as at least potentiating a reinvigorated democracy (Dahlberg 2001; Dahlberg and Siapera 2007; Papacharissi 2002). There remain concerns about inclusivity and equality, particularly in relation to access and media literacy issues (Papacharissi 2002).

Equally factors such as the fear of state or workplace surveillance, online harassment, as well as the uncivil nature of debates between ideologically opposed groups are argued to be barriers for social media acting as an openly accessible and inclusive space for individuals to participate in political discussions (Kruse et al. 2018). To counter the suggestion that digital technologies automatically facilitated spaces for a public sphere to emerge, scholars developed criteria against which spaces, platforms and groups could be measured (Dahlberg 2001). Poor (2005) offered four general conditions for examining a space used for debate: (1) the space should allow discourse often mediated; (2) it should permit participation from new, previously excluded, discussants; (3) topics should be political in nature; and (4) ideas are judged on merit, not the standing of the discussants. These conditions broadly align with the dimensions proposed by Dahlgren (2005) which focus on the space being (a) independent of vested interests, (b) inclusive and (c) permitting open non-hierarchical discussion. Public sphere theorists argue when studying any platform or space, it is crucial to assess all these three dimensions to allow us to determine the extent the platform offers the basic conditions for a public sphere to emerge and to contribute to civic and political pluralism.

Applying the concept of the public sphere to the Arab and Islamic World is controversial (Elsheikh and Lilleker 2021), as it risks downplaying the role of religion (Salvatore 2007), as well as the societal power relations which limit inclusivity (Khamis and Sisler 2010), in particular in relation to gender inequality. Due to these concerns, research highlights platform uses

can increase polarization (Beaufort 2018). Despite these structural limitations, many spaces within Islamic and Arab societies are found to meet the basic requirements of offering inclusive access to discursive debate (Khamis and Sisler 2010). Elsheikh and Lilleker (2021) identified the emergence of an online proto-public sphere in Egypt, where bourgeois groups addressed inequalities and were able to impact social norms in relation to women's health and well-being. Similarly, the Arab Spring showed social media platform use went beyond mere opinion formation and facilitated activists having influence over the wider media agenda (Aouragh and Alexander 2011). The latter point is crucial in understanding how public spheres grow and evolve in order to have influence over decision making. Verhoest (2019) shows how the eighteenth-century bourgeois habermasian public spheres formed out of discussions between entrepreneurs resisting the constraints on business imposed by emperors and kings. Gaining greater support for their ideas, and platforms which popularized their arguments, led for further discussion which ultimately shaped policy-making, with a choice being presented to the ancient regime that they should reform, or risk being removed. More modern interpretations focus on the ability of institutions to adapt to public demands and develop more deliberative forms of democracy, arguing that debates can emerge from 'communicative enclaves', go mainstream and shape decision making even at the supranational level (Nieminen 2006). These works and others posit the notion of a proto-public sphere, one which adopts the form and character of a public sphere in terms of Poor's (2005) criteria of involving debate, being inclusive, having a political nature and where arguments are judged on their merit, but not yet at a stage where they are able to exert wider influence. It is noted that these can emerge to rival hegemonic societal structures but can be limited in their impact and easily suppressed due to a loss of momentum or structural constraints imposed by platform providers

or state mechanisms (Splichal 2018). The latter is a particular threat within anocracies such as Egypt.

However, there is evidence of a real desire within the Egyptian middle-class to end the stagnation of debate (Elsheikh and Lilleker 2021). The release of Clubhouse, during a period of heightened use of digital technologies used to reduce social isolation, transcend borders and divides, and access information, was thus timely. The COVID-19 pandemic saw groups take to social media to build resilience and prevent isolation as well as to oppose government lockdown measures, mask wearing and vaccination programmes (Lilleker et al. 2021). Hence the 2020–21 period has seen a growth in use of technology for a variety of civic practices, changing ways humans work and interact, and increasing dependencies on technology in all areas of private and public life. In particular, video and audio chat became central to social life enabling social interactions, maintaining existing relations and reviving old relationships to maintain some sense of normality (Tomlinson and Black, 2021). Lottridge (2020) explains that even livestreaming, which replicates the performer–audience dichotomy and can be asynchronous, can be used for social copresence and to combat loneliness. The pandemic also increased the use of audio platforms. The 2019 decline in podcast downloads was reversed and new synchronous conversational platforms were launched, including Clubhouse (Boorstin 2021). While their increased popularity is in the context of the 'new normal' of online

synchronous interaction to combat isolation, their usage had the potential to go beyond idle chat. These platforms also offered spaces for individuals to come together and discuss subjects of public concern and common interest. We focus on the Clubhouse app due to its popularity in Egypt, as well as the nature of discussions hosted in its rooms. We explore to what extent the Clubhouse app, facilitated by the unique conditions of a pandemic, was able to cut across societal divisions, and whether it facilitated the emergence of some form of proto public sphere despite the challenges and risks posed within Egyptian society.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The research is exploratory by necessity and design, as Clubhouse is a new app with structural affordances that support open discussion but presents significant challenges for researchers. Therefore, in exploring the form and dynamics of discussions Egyptians participated in via the Clubhouse audio app we faced several methodological challenges. The affordances that support discussion includes rooms can be created at any time by any individual, Once a room has started, the conversations which take place have no time limit or specific duration, there is no facility to record and transcribe the conversation, although recording was introduced in November 2021, and it is difficult to verify the identity or location of all participants despite rules which request real names are used. There was also an ethical challenge, that being that participants could not be informed that they were under scrutiny for a research project. Hence all data had to be collected through monitoring rooms being created, close observation of discussion and anonymization of all participants (Giles 2016).

To understand usage, we monitored Clubhouse for four weeks, in the period February–March 2021, on a daily basis, for a minimum of twelve hours per day. Twenty rooms were identified for observation, the criteria being they had a minimum audience size of 2000 and where politics was core to the topic. Clubhouse does not allow searching for rooms by title. Instead, the app allows searches by club names so user interaction was crucial in identifying rooms. We also subscribed to clubs famous for organizing rooms as well as following famous politicians, public figures, social media influencers, lawyers, NGO employees, journalists and active moderators and speakers. In addition, the function whereby the app notifies users which rooms they were following was utilized. This procedure permitted locating relevant rooms and avoided dependence on suggestions from the Clubhouse algorithm or simply attending rooms related to famous clubs or individuals.

Discussions within the identified rooms were listened to and anonymised summaries were created, consistent with app rules at that time and to protect participants, which were subsequently translated into English from Arabic. Thematic analysis was applied to identify patterns within discussions (Braun and Clarke 2006) enabling us to ascertain the overall purpose of the room, the nature of the discussion and the communicative roles taken by participants (Braun and Clarke 2012). Our analysis thus captures the core topics, the roles participants played, and any particularly important interventions made. Hence our analysis offers a holistic view of the experiences of participants (Kiger and Varpio 2020), avoiding a granular view which could threaten the anonymity of the participants and contravene Clubhouse rules. Consistent with this strategy, no direct quotes are utilized, and names of participants are only used if they have been reported already in traditional media. Based on this thematic analysis, the next section will highlight the main themes of Egyptians' discussions on Clubhouse.

## **CLUBHOUSE DISCUSSIONS: RECONCILIATION, EMPOWERMENT AND IMAGINING**

Clubhouse was used for a range of purposes, including livestreaming celebrity performances or a form of radio programme. The rooms we identified as relevant were those designed to permit some form of political discussion. Focusing on these rooms, Egyptians' use of Clubhouse appears to have adhered to some criteria of a public sphere. The app itself was autonomous from state interference, although monitoring was possible, we also show it was inclusive and meritocratic. Three broad political themes stood out. Firstly, we found rooms used to promote reconciliation, bringing disparate groups together in order to overcome differences that developed since the revolution. Secondly, we found rooms designed to give marginalized groups a voice. Thirdly, interlinked with previous themes, we found rooms concerned with developing solutions for the current challenges within Egyptian politics and society. We develop our discussion focusing on these themes.

## **POLITICAL RECONCILIATION**

Formally marking ten years since the Egyptian revolution on 25 January 2011, rooms were created to bring together representatives of groups who had participated in the revolution from across the political spectrum. The rooms lasted for three full consecutive days, 17–19 February 2021, with more than twelve hours discussions taking place each day. Most were speaking to one another for the first time, some had not met for ten years. Some were based in Egypt, where others lived in exile. Participants included political activists who participated in the revolution from day one, members and leaders of the political parties at the forefront of politics in early 2011, youth in exile, youths who had been imprisoned, dissident Muslim Brotherhood members and affiliates as well as ordinary citizens. Given the polarization, one might expect discussions to be dominated by grievances and recrimination. However, most participants took the opportunity to reflect, including sharing what they see now as mistakes, and how their attitudes, personalities and political stances have changed. Equally, some discussed how they find themselves locked in the vicious circle of the revolution, as if time stopped in 2013. These reflective sessions can be viewed as important for the future of Egypt. They can help neutralize some of the polarization that at least divides the political elite and those who supported the values underpinning the revolution. Despite some participants having had political fights in real life, having accused each other of treason because of their different political views and having boycotted or trolled one another's social media accounts; during these sessions they apologized to each other in front of an audience of more than 2000. Many explained how they viewed their reactions and behaviour as childish and due to inexperience. Many also highlighted that using social media platforms, especially Twitter, which allows a limited number of words, increases misunderstanding between divides. Reflecting on past behaviours, platform use and the confrontational style they adopted, they highlighted the importance of Clubhouse in offering an opportunity for debate, mutual respect and understanding due to the synchronous live nature of the platform. Many of the participants also stated hopes that their public apology on Clubhouse and the acts of reconciliation would set an example for ordinary citizens. The sessions also permitted reflection on the roles of political figures prominent during the 2012 election. Most again blamed inexperience, explaining they regretted their choices and that the contest led them to develop a general distrust for public figures.

Participants shared the personal losses they experienced due to their political stances and the regret they now suffered, taking personal responsibility rather than contributing to a culture of blame. A woman affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood, who participated along with her husband in the sit-in in Rabaa, explained how her husband was killed there by security forces. Speaking loudly, she asked herself 'what was I thinking, why did I take part'. She spoke of her traumatization caused by the act of listening to revolutionary

songs of that time and how she shields her children from knowing about the events. Reflecting on her avowal to not allow her children to join the Muslim Brotherhood, discussion focused on whether membership of the Muslim Brotherhood will decline in the future. Another speaker explained how he paid an unnecessarily personal price by divorcing his wife who opposed his involvement in politics, and how he regrets that now. Another speaker, a former member of the Muslim Brotherhood in exile, spoke about the cultural isolation he had suffered. As examples, he explained how he learned to be racist, to judge non-believers harshly, and to practice racism on those different from him. He explained his world-view changed when he left Egypt and became free of the teaching of the Brotherhood. While living and studying abroad, he explained how he has learned to accept those who are different, including homosexuals and atheists.

The open discussions also reflected on how Egypt has developed since the revolution and how it needs to fundamentally change. There were differences in the willingness to participate in documenting experiences so future generations could learn from their mistakes. Participants who did not lose much, or did not lose anything at a personal level, wanted to document the events and their experiences. Yet, those with the deepest regrets bluntly refused, they did not want to remember the details and sought to protect their children from their own painful memories. These interactions demonstrated the deep pain felt when recalling their experiences and actions. However, many participants explained how Egyptian children were raised with the aspirations and beliefs of the revolution. Having grown up to believe they can change the universe; they need to know the truth. Participants explained how they mistakenly believed they knew Egypt and how at the time of the revolution everyone claimed to know what Egyptians wanted. This led discussion around the demands made, and for them to be self-critical of the positions they took. Thus, discussions exhibited high levels of reflexivity and empathy throughout the process of reconciliation. There was no indication of anyone being prevented from speaking, and all viewpoints were awarded equal respect. As this was the first time these political groups and individuals had met since 2010, we can be confident the reflections offered were their own. Furthermore, as all participants were closely tied together by shared experience, and with their identities verified, it is likely the culture of honesty and openness was genuine. There was also no state monitoring or censorship as when the rooms were created in February 2021 the app was still young and had not attracted the attention of the state. Hence, the room fulfilled the criteria of a public sphere in most respects, but the reconciliatory reflections were locked within the room and were lost as the room closed. With no participation by representatives of the current regime and no opportunity for the discussion to be a lasting artefact, it has had little impact on the wider national public sphere beyond being awarded some media coverage and social media posts. Therefore, discussions focusing on reconciliation can be no more than indicative of a proto-public sphere. This demonstrates that Clubhouse has provided a platform where people could contribute to societal reconciliation despite existing within a polarized political system overseen by a repressive government, but the power of such discussions is limited.

## **EMPOWERING THE MARGINALIZED**

Women within Arab societies have managed to have some societal impact through their use of social media platforms to tackle gender inequalities (Thorsen and Sreedharan 2019; Elsheikh and Lilleker 2021). Clubhouse rooms were quickly created to provide a safe place for marginalized voices, mainly women, to discuss taboo subjects that cannot be openly discussed in wider Egyptian society or awarded attention by traditional media outlets. One interesting example of a Clubhouse room exerting political influence was a room dedicated to challenging the personal status draft law which upheld the right of male guardians to give consent for a

woman to marry, and the husband to give consent for divorce. Egyptian mainstream media published misleading headlines stating that a draft amendment would apply penalty fees and imprisonment on men who get married again without notifying their first wife. These statements were taken to be true and welcomed by opponents within society, but activists who had scrutinized the bill created a room where feminist experts and lawyers presented counter information explaining the negative impact for women. Urging attendees to read the whole bill and not be fooled by false headlines, they explained how the bill would allow, if approved, a woman's father, brother or any male guardian to sign marriage articles on her behalf or file a lawsuit to annul her marriage despite her disapproval. They also highlighted how the bill gave any male relative power to prevent a woman from travelling and curtail her right to register the birth of a child or obtain a passport for their child and warned women they would have less power over decisions regarding their children's education or medical care. These discussions sparked a major campaign across Twitter and Facebook and offline as women's rights NGOs became involved. The pressure led the Al-Youm Al-Sabaa newspaper that originally published the false claims to remove it from their website and for the amendments to be abandoned.

However, this was an isolated example. Women's issues raised on Clubhouse were rarely part of co-ordinated campaigns designed to impact policy. Egyptian comedian Bassem Yousef held a therapy session for invited Egyptian women living in the United States who claimed they were sexually harassed by an Egyptian priest from the Egyptian Orthodox church in the United States. The main victim explained the process in the United States and obstacles she faced from the Egyptian Orthodox church, until he was finally suspended. Other women accused and named other priests currently working in the orthodox church in Egypt, including a priest who is a close relative of Pope Tawadros II, head of Egypt's Coptic Church, suggesting Tawadros was protecting a relative facing accusations of sexual harassment. Other women joined naming and shaming men who had sexually harassed. But without a legal expert, although a female lawyer did attend without listening to the testimony of the accusers and commented briefly on sexual harassment laws in Egypt, no clear or realistic demands were formulated. Equally the participants who spoke were all highlighting historical harassment, so while giving them a voice the room was only a space to vent anger.

While one Egyptian priest was suspended in the United States for sexual harassment, no cases were investigated from his time in Egypt. This case demonstrates that to have power and influence, gaining attention of a wider public, often through traditional media, is required as discussion within any online space can easily be self-contained.

Rooms also became safe spaces for discussing taboo subjects. Several rooms discussed drug legalization in Egypt. One room invited legal and economics experts to discuss how Egypt could benefit from legally trading in drugs, one guest suggesting planting crops and exporting produce to other countries to boost the economy. These rooms also invited Egyptians living abroad in countries where drugs are legal, such as The Netherlands, to speak about the regulations there. Doctors also joined the rooms to explain the health issues, often drawing on their experiences treating addicts, and highlighting how drugs in Egypt are usually mixed with chemicals making them even more dangerous. Other rooms took a non-scientific approach with drug dealers and consumers joining to explain how to obtain drugs without being caught by the police. Other rooms discussed sensitive sexual or religious topics, titled 'I am Egyptian and queer' or 'I am Atheist'. The rooms were mainly organized by Egyptians abroad explaining their experiences. These rooms failed the inclusivity criteria as they could become hostile environments when discussions were opened up to the audience leading moderators to only allow those they knew to speak.

While Clubhouse offered spaces where marginalized groups could have a voice, the results were mixed, and few discussions had the capacity to enter the public sphere beyond the room. Across all the rooms, only one case evidenced a campaign involving activists mobilizing an audience and gaining coverage in media which in turn impacted government policy. The fact that the Clubhouse room was part of a wider campaign that began in February 2021, and that activists used the room to increase support for their campaign in order to bring down the draft bill, suggests the limited real-world power of these discussions. Rooms devoted to women's rights were no more than a place to vent anger. Participants also ran risks when naming and shaming men, as well as discussing criminal behaviour, without legal advice or a lawyer being present. Therefore, rooms which empowered marginalized voices may have exposed mainstream, conservative Egyptians to experiences and ideas that were unfamiliar, and may have bred some sense of understanding across society, yet with no trained moderator or legal framework, the conversation could retrench existing prejudices and become discriminatory rather than inclusive.

## ALTERNATIVE FUTURES

While reconciliation and giving a voice to marginalized groups can be positive for societal cohesion, perhaps where a direct link to the political public sphere was most needed were the rooms where Egyptian citizens discussed visions for the future of the country. Reflecting societal desires, many rooms were created to discuss ways to improve the political situation in Egypt. The most active was entitled 'send your message to President Al-Sisi'. The room was split into two after a dispute between moderators and audience members on whether it was appropriate to use derogatory language, highlighting the challenge of creating rooms with no restrictions. The original room, which deemed this behaviour inappropriate, simply asked audience members to avoid using insults while speaking and to focus on finding solutions for the political crisis and societal polarization. This room maintained an inclusive and non-hierarchical character, facilitating equal participation by elites and ordinary citizens. Polarizing topics were frequently discussed, for example the issue of political prisoners. Participants agreed solutions should allow Egyptian leaders to avoid embarrassment while developing reasons for releasing those incarcerated on political charges. The group agreed calls for immediate release of all prisoners, a staple of street protests, was unrealistic and that asking other states to put pressure on the Egyptian leaders was inappropriate. They proposed President Al-Sisi could call for quick re-trials, which can finally lead to their release. One speaker suggested changing the framing of demands, such as asking for 'forgiveness' and not 'reconciliation'. Another speaker, abroad in exile, suggested inviting police authorities to join the room to listen to their ideas.

One room, moderated by revolution figure 'Wael Ghoneim', founder of 'We are all Khaled Said', the Facebook page which helped spark the Egyptian revolution, called on the audience to think out of the box. He criticized the way opposition forces use insults and the methodologies of their affiliated media, such as Istanbul-based opposition media Al-Shaq, Mekamleen and Watan, who produce media packages just to mock Al-Sisi and called for a reset in the relationship. He asked Muslim Brotherhood members to reduce the polarization and develop ways to expand the public sphere and increase participation in debates. Ghoneim claimed that, if the language of the opposition changed, mainly those challenging Al-Sisi from exile, detainees would be released. Ghoneim discussed his initiative in detail with more than 2500 audience members, but no action plan was developed, and the ideas failed to percolate from beyond the confines of his room. In contrast, the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist movements moderated highly organized rooms with the aim of mobilizing their audience. Organized mainly from outside Egypt, discussions tackled the issue of political prisoners but

most only permitted authorized speakers to participate. One room discussed the conditions detainees faced in Egyptian prisons and fifteen former detainees spoke about their experiences. Another room offered detainees' wives still in Egypt a connection with the Muslim Brotherhood community in exile. This room created a step-by-step action plan. That this did not happen in other rooms might reflect the organization skills and resources which gave the Muslim Brotherhood an advantage over other opposition groups.

However, Muslim Brotherhood rooms largely took a narrow perspective and, unlike those created by Ghoneim and designed 'to send a message to President Al-Sisi', just promoted the Muslim Brotherhood agenda. In a room recalling the Rabaa sit-in protest, false allegations were made such as claiming Rabaa was bombed by army aeroplanes. The fact that they were able to survive this attack, and that there was no evidence, suggests this was spread to deepen distrust of the Al-Sisi government and further entrench polarization. Some speakers living in exile, and so enjoying a more stable and comfortable life, happily incited those living in Egypt to resist and oppose the current regime. Such calls to action led to altercations when the wider audience was allowed to speak. The Clubhouse became the focus of media attention, the presence of these groups, and their mobilization strategies led Sky News Arabic to claim that the Muslim Brotherhood was using Clubhouse to convey coded messages to members within Egypt as well as manipulating public opinion and recruiting new members (Salah 2021).

Other opposition groups affiliated to the spirit of the revolution were de-centralized and operated haphazardly, failing to reach the largely disengaged masses (Elsheikh 2018). While members of all political segments may take part in Clubhouse discussions, it is more difficult to change the mindsets which motivate them to use the app. For the state it can be a tool for monitoring and repressing dissent, for opposition groups and ordinary citizens a means for considering a better future, but only the Muslim Brotherhood seems to have the capacity to mobilize audiences. Many who wish to heal societal divisions appear to see such lofty intentions as beyond reach, and their experiences of personal suffering, losing family members by death or divorce, prevents them stimulating the positive emotions required for activism (Jasper 2014). The completely opposite is found with Islamic groups, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood. Their mobilization strategy is rooted in 'the pleasure of revenge, particularly after a long series of humiliations' (Jasper 2014: 209) and in those seeking to mobilize those with nothing else to lose having lost their families, jobs and under attack from their own governments (Fisher 1989). Ordinary citizens were able to find a means for discussing political issues while avoiding polarization, seeming to enjoy venting and sharing ideas, being listened to and entering into discussions with strangers who will not judge them. However, most of these positive examples are on the margins of the mainstream of activism within Egyptian Clubhouse rooms.

## CONCLUSION

Our analysis allows us to argue that Clubhouse in some ways resembles the Habermasian concept of the public sphere. Clubhouse rooms allow private persons to come together and discuss political topics of public concerns and represented relatively safe spaces for marginalized groups in Egyptian society largely free from interference from the state. However, discussions cannot exert power and influence over the elite and bourgeois minority, in terms of

either setting parameters for discussion, deciding who can speak or linking activities in rooms with the wider public sphere. Perhaps like many platforms, Clubhouse redefines many of the principles at the heart of the public sphere. Firstly, such apps privilege those with advanced devices and stable internet connections, echoing Papacharissi's (2002) concerns regarding technological empowerment. Secondly apps define social justice and equality as conforming to the rules of the rooms, taking a turn to speak and eliding the notion of speaking with that of being heard and having influence (Fiig 2011). While for a discussion to work rules are necessary, there were numerous clashes when a moderator did not follow the order and allowed a 'celebrity' out of turn. But the fact some waited six hours or more to speak shows the desire to have a voice and perhaps be part of a movement for change. But Clubhouse discussions can only instigate a change in attitudes providing the discussions conform to Habermasian principles of inclusivity and openness. In-app practices of heavy moderation and tight agenda setting can impede that. However, the major barrier is that while rooms offered a platform for everyone few participants had the capacity to exert wider influence.

Our observations show Clubhouse rooms offering insight into the issues circulating within Egyptian private spheres and the app provided a way for these to become part of a public sphere. Without technology such as Clubhouse these discussions would have been impossible immediately due to the pandemic restrictions, but also because of opposition groups being imprisoned and in exile and the state monopoly control over media outlets. The safe space Clubhouse provided facilitated deliberation (Fiig 2011), especially among those focusing on reconciliation, and participants engaged in 'respectful and open communication, without intimidation' performing a form of 'participatory democracy' (Kruse et al. 2018). This evidences that as a mediated space for discourse the rooms fulfilled Poor's (2005) four conditions and arguably represent proto-public spheres (Elsheikh and Lilleker 2021). Clubhouse rooms facilitated connections to form between a large number of Egyptian citizens with different political affiliations who were chosen to speak due to their worthiness and their unity of interest in the topic. Audience numbers were high and there was high commitment to participate despite fears of repression. However, the app presents structural barriers for participation beyond access. Participation can be very time consuming, as there are no limits on how long a room can be open, there are no rules governing behaviour and users can present arguments as facts without challenge, insult one another and be intimidated by threat of being reported which leads to suspension. There are also concerns about the protection of users' privacy, the difficulty in deleting or deactivating accounts and there no clear information on how personal or discussion data is stored.

Yet, Clubhouse offers much potential. As an app which enforces account verification and use of real names users are more likely to communicate more politely and empathetically, as already noted as a difference between Facebook and Twitter (Lilleker et al. 2021). Equally, due to the synchronous nature of

discussions there is a strong interactive and dialogic concept at the heart of the app, and the audible nature can give insights into the emotions of speakers and set the tone for responses. Therefore, as a means of overcoming physical as well as political distance, bringing differing sides together to overcome polarization, the twin factors of identification and synchronous audio may be beneficial. However, whether true reconciliation can be achieved is dependent on the political motives that drive discussions, as with Muslim Brotherhood rooms they can also deepen polarization in society. But the major challenge is for the discussions to have influence on wider public opinion which can only occur if a bridge is built between groups discussing issues on the app and the institutions of state. A positive development is that some members of parliament and ministers have participated in discussions. This can help transform discussions into a having opinion formation and decision-making capacity. Recording discussions can also give them longevity, although during our data collection all conversations and the ideas discussed disappeared when the room closed. But fundamentally what is needed is political will to debate, listen and learn from all sides, and for journalists to monitor discussions and remediate them to inform the wider public sphere. Currently these factors seem to be lacking and hence currently participation in Clubhouse rooms may impact beliefs and attitudes, if only momentarily, but they remain in a proto-public sphere unable to have a positive impact on society.

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