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Poll: Internet Use in Egypt Remained High During Protest; Alhurra Audience Tripled ^[1]

WASHINGTON – Use of the Internet and social networks was a significant factor in Egypt during the past month, even when the Egyptian government tried to block online access, according to a survey of Cairo and Alexandria residents  released this morning by the U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors.

33% of respondents said they had used the Internet, and 7% said it was the medium they used the most. That “used most” percentage was higher than radio (2%) and newspapers (3%). But the Internet falls behind radio and newspapers in the “used at all” category, as just over half of respondents said they used radio (51%) or newspapers (52%).

One surprise in the survey: it was not just young people using the Internet.

"Somewhat contrary to our expectations," said William Bell, BBG Research Director, "the use of these technologies was not strongly correlated with age."

And note the Internet reach of respondents during the protest – 33% -- was just slightly lower than pre-protest Internet use, well within the margin of error: a similar BBG survey a year ago showed 34% of survey respondents in Cairo and Alexandria reported having used the Internet in previous week, 26% had used social networks and 22% were regular users of Facebook, which would make Facebook alone one of the most popular media in Egypt's major cities.

This raises an important caveat: this survey only included Cairo and Alexandria. Looking at last year's survey data for the rest of Egypt, all of those data for Internet use are reduced by half, according to the BBG.

The survey data may also have been skewed by methodology: it was a telephone survey, "both by land lines at home and by mobile," according to Bell. But he conceded only 80% of the people there have telephones.

Of course the number of people using the Internet was dwarfed by television, which reached 98% of respondents and was used “most” by 86%. But here again the survey results contained a surprise.

Alhurra, the U.S. international broadcasting channel, more than tripled its usual viewers since last year: 25% had watched, up from 7% a year ago, and 9% were using it “most.”

That meant Alhurra had more viewers than Al Jazeera, which reached 22% of viewers, with 6% using it “most.” Of course during the survey period – 4-10 February – the Egyptian government started to block Al Jazeera broadcasts in that country at the end of January, with some but not complete success.

Al Aribiya was well ahead of both Alhurra and Al Jazeera, with 65% used and 44% used "most." CNN and BBC Arabic were well behind, at 16%/5% and 13%/5%, respectively.

One reason for Alhurra's increased audience, according to Brian Conniff, President of Middle East Broadcasting Networks, which includes Alhurra TV, was that viewers turned away from Egyptian state broadcasters..

"Domestic TV had very little credibility," said Coniff. "One of the [protesters'] slogans was 'We want to stop relying on foreign channels.'"

Coniff also cited three steps Alhurra had taken as helping to increase viewers: The channel had "beefed up our presence" with a new anchor position on the Nile with a staff of 30, using a "debate and discussion" format with government officials and protesters on the same panels, and embracing its identity as the U.S. government's channel.

"Actually that played to our favor in this crisis," said Coniff. "There was a high level of interest in what was America doing, what was America thinking." By televising the debate in the broad U.S. policy community – not just White House statements – Coniff said Alhurra gained attention and viewers.

This flash survey will be followed in the coming months with more detailed polling, promised Bell, which will address broadcasters' credibility and viewers' attitudes.
