Googling Egypt's presidential candidates

By Gabriel Koehler-Derrick

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With the approach of Egypt's presidential elections on Wednesday, a variety of polls have been published trying to anticipate the outright winner, or at least identify which two candidates are capable of winning enough votes to force a runoff election. Given the challenges associated with polling in Egypt, the historic nature of the election, and a confusing series of legal rulings that have dramatically shaken up the field of contestants, it is not surprising that the outcome remains unclear. While far from perfect, data from internet search trends suggest a far less ambiguous outcome: Amr Moussa is comfortably in the lead and Muhammad Morsi is the candidate most likely to face him should there be a runoff.
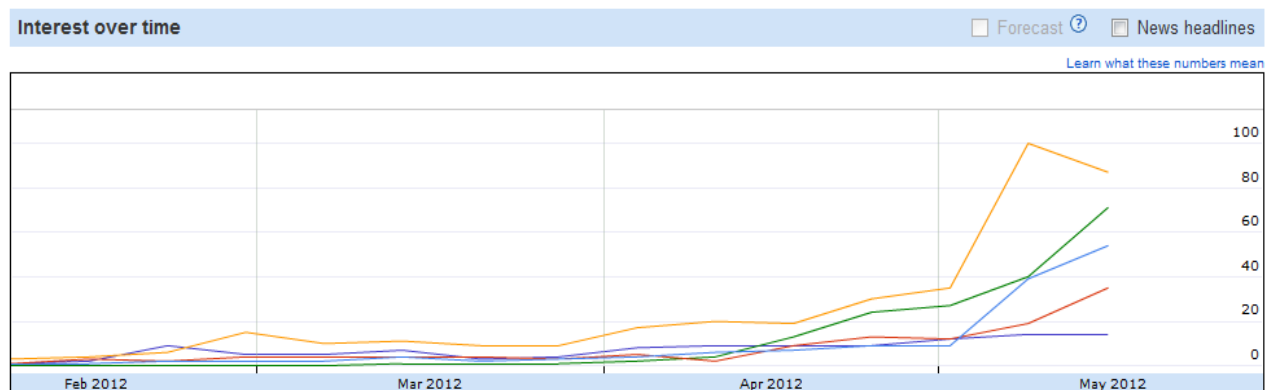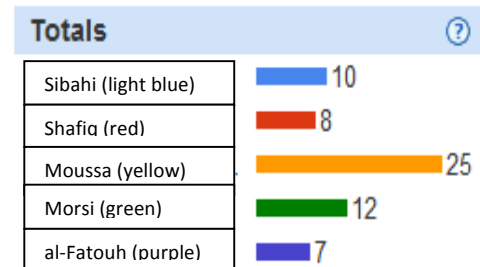
Anyone familiar with the telecommunications industry in Egypt might question the utility of using data derived from internet searches to better understand political developments. While internet penetration rates have grown impressively, according to a recent survey conducted by A.C. Nielsen for Google's MENA office, only about 39% of Egyptians have "regular access" (defined in the survey as logging in once a month) to the internet. The data from the A.C. Nielsen survey also show that Egypt's community of internet users are disproportionately male, and younger than average, with the 15 to 24 and 25 to 34 age cohorts being particularly well represented. To the best of my knowledge, credible statistics about the income and education level of Egypt's internet users are not publically available, but it doesn't seem too much of a stretch to presume that typical internet users are skewed towards urban areas, and better educated and significantly wealthier than national averages. Because of these challenges, data derived from internet searches cannot be considered statistically representative of the Egyptian population.

Despite these drawbacks, internet search data enjoys a number of advantages for examining the presidential race. First, the number of data points for any time period is huge. A back of the envelope calculation, based on the Nielsen survey and some basic population data from the UN, suggests that in Egypt, Google gets almost 26 million searches a day. While only a tiny fraction of these searches are politically related, nine out of the "top 10 rising people" in Google's 2011 Zeitgeist survey of Egypt's search trends were connected to the revolution or politics more broadly, indicating just how influential political developments in 2011 were on search trends in Egypt. By way of comparison, none of the "top 10 rising people searches" in Turkey has anything to do with politics, and only one of the "top 10 rising people searches" in Canada , former leader of the National Democratic Party (NDP) Jack Layton. Data from Google AdWords, provides an updated 30-day average of the number of searches for a given term, shows some impressive averages for each of the top presidential contenders. This is crucial because it provides a sense of scale for the Insights for Search data cited below, which uses normalized results not raw numbers to plot the trend lines for the various candidates.

Name	Search Term	AdWords Results, Monthly Searches (as of 5/20/12)
Abdel Moneim Abu al-Fotouh	"عبد المنعم أبو الفتوح "	33,100
Ahmed Shafiq	"أحمد شفيق"	33,100
Amr Moussa	"عمرو موسى"	27,100
Hamdin Sabahi	"حمدين صباحي"	18,100
Muhammad Morsi	"محمد مرسي"	9,900

By comparison, the soccer team "al-Ahly" is averaging 2,740,000 searches and pop-star Tamer Ashour 201,000 per month. Clearly, Google search in Egypt is not in any danger of being overtaken by politicians. Nonetheless, these 30 day averages are significantly higher than historical trends for all but the most prominent individual political figures throughout 2011.

In addition to providing a sense for how much attention the individual candidates are generating, Google's Insights for Search tool allows us to see how the candidates stack up against one another over time. Here the online data confirms the results of most polling: Amr Moussa is the candidate to beat.

Totals	?
Sibahi (light blue)	10
Shafiq (red)	8
Moussa (yellow)	25
Morsi (green)	12
al-Fatouh (purple)	7

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Well ahead of the other major contenders the sharp spike in searches for Moussa in the graph shows that Egyptians were eager to learn more about his candidacy even prior to the debate and the highest number of searches amongst all the top candidates between February 1st and May 18th came in a surge of searches for Moussa on May 11th, the day of the debate itself. The fact that the trend line for Abu al-Fatouh remained flat during the same period gives credence to those who interpreted his performance

as somewhat lackluster. At the very least, we can see from the search data that Moussa appears to be generated far more attention online than his debating rival both prior to the debate as well as after.

A comparison of the geographic data associated with the trend lines for each candidate suggests just how far ahead of the other candidates Moussa is: searches for Sabahi, Shafiq, and Abu al-Fotouh are constrained almost exclusively to the urban centers of Cairo and Alexandria. Morsi does only slightly better, generating significant levels of searches in the governorate of al-Sharqiya. While this is not in and of itself surprising, the search trends for the most influential and enduring figures during the revolution (for example Khalid Sa'id, Muhammad al-Baradei, Mona al-Shazly and Wael Ghonim) generated interest outside of the population centers of Cairo and Alexandria. While it would be a mistake to presume that only those committed to Moussa are interested in information about his campaign, in fact many of those conducting Google searches for Moussa's name may be undecided voters—but absent some indication that millions of Egyptians have already made up their minds and aren't interested in further details about the candidates, it should probably be a source of worry for Abu al-Fatouh and the other candidates hoping to challenge Moussa that their campaigns are generating so few searches across the rest of the country. If anecdotal reporting is correct, this is truly an impressive achievement for the Moussa campaign, because Abu al-Fotouh, and to a lesser degree Muhammad Morsi, are the candidates you would anticipate young, wired, middle class Egyptians to search for online.

Of course, simply 'googling' a candidate is hardly an endorsement. But given the confusing series of legal rulings that have dramatically impacted the field of candidates, one of the largest challenges facing each of the contenders is name recognition. For example, although they are technically candidates, search data suggests that Abdullah al-Ashal, Hossam Khayr Allah, Muammad Fawzi al-Aysa, Mahmoud Hossam al-Din Galal, and Abu `Ez al-Hariri, are all virtually unknown outside of the capital.

So which of the candidates might challenge Amr Moussa? Muhammad Morsi, who seems to be separating from the pack, looks to be the one candidate who could challenge Moussa in a runoff, if there is no outright winner. Nonetheless, Morsi faces a different problem from the other candidates. As the only contender affiliated with an actual political party, the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), search data indicates that the FJP enjoys far more name recognition than Morsi himself. This means that Morsi will have to work to distinguish himself from the FJP and the Brotherhood more broadly. This presumably would have been much less difficult for a better known figure, like Khayrat al-Shatir, who generated enormous attention when he was nominated as the FJP's candidate for the presidency before being barred in a [controversial legal decision](#). Likewise, the prominent Salafi candidate Hazem Abu Ismail provides another interesting example of what might have been. Like al-Shater, his candidacy generated enormous amounts of attention online. It is interesting to note that from February until mid-May 2012 both al-Shater and Abu Ismail generated higher search totals than Moussa and both barred candidates enjoyed a far more impressive geographic reach than any of the remaining candidates.

A look at the search trends for the candidates in the Republican primaries from May 2011 to April 2012, in which Ron Paul generated twice as many total searches as the presumptive nominee Mitt Romney,

suggest some of the reasons why it would be unwise to ascribe "predictive" powers to internet search data. Still, after a year of examining search data in Egypt, I have no doubt that search trends in Egypt accurately reflect attentiveness online, which in turn provides a unique window on the events and actors animating Egyptian society and political life. While, as the Ron Paul example demonstrates in the American case, discrepancies between online and offline behavior exist, barring some totally unforseen event (far from impossible given the series of twists and turns in Egyptian politics since late February) Amr Moussa will almost certainly be the candidate to beat on Wednesday.

If you are interested in tracking search trends for the major candidates in the days leading up to the election, sign into Google and click this link.

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