

The Islamist opposition online in Egypt and Jordan

By Pete Ajemian

January, 2008. An October report from Reporters without Borders indicates that the level of media freedom in both Egypt and Jordan has deteriorated over the past year following the jailing of several journalists and political activists in both countries.ⁱ This warrants a look at how opposition groups in these two states are using the internet to adapt to increasingly hostile print and television media environments. While Egypt and Jordan have relatively low internet penetration rates, 8.3%ⁱⁱ and 14.8%ⁱⁱⁱ respectively, both countries are currently undertaking programs to promote and expand access, thus making online media activism increasingly relevant to political developments.^{iv}

In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) has been raising its online profile at a time when the group is making limited gains in the official political process. In Jordan, regime policies have not been as hostile as in Egypt, but a series of recent measures limiting media freedom encouraged the Islamist opposition group, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), to launch an internet campaign supporting its candidates in the November 2007 elections. Although both groups share a Muslim Brotherhood ideological background, the use of the internet has varied between these two organizations, and is shaped by the organizational dynamics of these groups and the wider political context in which they function. Accordingly, while both the MB and the IAF have used websites to support short-term political objectives like election campaigns, the use of individualized online platforms such as blogs for media activism has been so far limited to the Egyptian MB. The IAF's current internet strategy appears to be motivated by success at the polls rather than participating in broader liberal discourses enabled by new media. I suggest that while both countries have experienced setbacks in media freedom, the ways in which their respective Islamist opposition groups have utilized new media have played out differently according to factors internal and external to these groups as political actors.

Furthermore, I argue that while new media technologies have provided some newfound benefits to opposition groups, they can bring potential challenges as well.

New media: empowerment through convergence

To understand how online media enable opposition groups to establish counter-public spheres^v of media discourse, one should look beyond the net's increased interconnectivity, speed and its compatibility with networked organizations. Instead, the benefits of media convergence, bringing together print, video and broadcast in cyberspace, best explain how sub-state groups can circumvent their marginalization in mainstream media outlets. This phenomenon has shifted the power to create media content downward to a new range of small producers, while the reach enabled by new media shifts outward, allowing groups and individuals to transmit their media content to a global audience.^{vi} Opposition group websites that feature print media, radio broadcasts and video footage are the technical side of media convergence. However, while websites have come to serve as an important resource for the dissemination of print and broadcast media, blogs best demonstrate how media convergence empowers individuals to shape media counter-public spheres.

Blogs intersect and compliment existing transnational media, allowing for dissident groups and their sympathizers to tap into the mainstream.^{vii} Blogs also differ from websites in their low cost and user-friendly operability and maintenance. Some indicate that as a form of expression they have the potential to be a significant channel of 'democratic' discourse in Muslim contexts since blogging requires little technical knowledge, hosting can be free, and users can easily communicate widely with one other.^{viii} At the same time, these individualized media platforms can cut against top-down leadership structures, and damage unity of message.

Despite the relatively low level of internet infrastructure in the Arab world, much of the new energy in Arab politics comes from a relatively small group of activists, and a technology that empowers their efforts could have a disproportionate impact even if it does not reach a mass base.^{ix} Thus, the value of blogs as a form of new media is that they allow for individual grass roots political journalism and facilitate the creation of a

counter-public sphere of discourse that has the potential to penetrate mainstream media. However, the impact of the integration of the Arab world into cyberspace will not be uniform and must be considered along with the social and political contexts in which actors use this technology towards their political agendas.^x

The case of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt

The Muslim Brotherhood's status in Egypt as an illegal organization has impeded its ability to issue media, while other political organizations recognized as legal political parties have been allowed to do so.^{xi} To participate in elections, the Brotherhood skirts state restrictions by fielding independent candidates allied with secular opposition parties.^{xii}

Media and open political activism have been at the center of the Brotherhood's attempts to break into the Egyptian political mainstream. Precedent for such contestation exists in state policies towards print media, whereby ownership of the so-called "national press," including the largest circulating daily newspapers, is in the hands of the Supreme Press Council and the Shura Council, an entity within Egypt's upper house in parliament.^{xiii} **[for more on this see Peter Black's article in this issue]** And although Islamist political views have been catered to in the Labor Party's publication *Al-Shaab*, it was suspended in 2003.^{xiv} The regime's historical control over media through such entities as the Supreme Press Council has been enhanced by the renewal of the state emergency law in April of 2006^{xv} and antiterrorism laws introduced under Mubarak.^{xvi} Members of the Brotherhood were, as recently as March of 2006, arrested for possessing anti-government publications and hiding printers and flyers.^{xvii}

After the Egyptian regime closed down the official MB website in September 2004 the movement fought back by decentralizing its web presence to over eighteen separate sites promoting individual candidates.^{xviii} In the run up to the 2005 presidential elections, activists began using the internet to organize demonstrations.^{xix} The online media were incorporated into an overall campaign strategy that combined websites for each of its candidates with an internet radio station promoting the MB platform and the individual candidate sites.^{xx} Part of this online campaign was meant to counter the control

of the Egyptian Information Ministry and Television Union over the allocation of television broadcasts for parliamentary candidates; the MB launched an advertisement campaign explaining its election platform and the history of the group in a two hour video on its internet site.^{xxi} The editor of the MB's website stated that this was an effort to link the group's leaders with the street since the Brotherhood was not allowed to appear on official television or terrestrial programs.^{xxii}

In addition to mobilizing support for its electoral campaigns, the MB used websites to criticize and publicize election tampering. The most recent instance of this was during the 2007 Shura Council elections, when the Brotherhood claimed poll rigging and protested the detention of party members.^{xxiii} In response to these activities the MB's official website published articles in both Arabic^{xxiv} and English^{xxv} denouncing the measures against it. The Brotherhood's official website also hosted video footage taken by hidden cameras allegedly depicting ballot box tampering at a number of the polling stations.^{xxvi} But perhaps the most interesting development in the MB's usage of internet-based media has been the entrance of the group into the blogosphere. As a convergent platform that enables individuals to utilize multiple media formats and penetrate other spheres of media discourse, the use of blogging by Brotherhood members has ushered in both new opportunities and challenges to the organization by empowering individuals to serve as both the vehicle behind and the face of the MB's political media.

The Brotherhood enters the blogosphere

In recent years, the Egyptian regime has become more aggressive with security crackdowns on internet political activists, especially targeting the MB.^{xxvii} Some argue that the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood learned the power of blogging from the Kifaya movement, an alliance of opposition groups that relied heavily on the internet to coordinate demonstrations against the regime.^{xxviii} The movement's blogging began to have a political impact in Egypt in 2004-2005, bringing it to the attention of other opposition groups in Egypt.^{xxix} In this sense, regime attempts to suppress activists and journalists have backfired, resulting in increased currency for both individuals and movements like the MB in Egyptian politics.^{xxx}

Blogs have also enabled individuals in the Brotherhood to partake in opposition media activism.^{xxxvi} This is evident in how today's younger Muslim Brothers are trying to adopt this technology to generate the kinds of solidarity, support and attention enjoyed by bloggers in other sectors of Egyptian society.^{xxxvii} In addition to individual bloggers, the MB maintains an official website, <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/>. The site works to raise party awareness with editorials recently featured on its website entitled, "Blogs of the sons of the arrested Brothers... shout out against the tyrants,"^{xxxviii} "The slogans of the youth in the world of the internet: Enter Politics through the door of blogs,"^{xxxix} and "The Bloggers send a message of warning... we will speak our opinions out loud."^{xl} By the spring of 2007, the number of Brotherhood bloggers had risen from zero to around 150 in less than a year.^{xli}

As Brotherhood blogging surged, so did government arrests. Human Rights Watch reported that more than 1,000 members of the Brotherhood were detained between March of 2006 and March of 2007 and 800 remained imprisoned as of June 2007.^{xlii} Yet the decentralized blogosphere remained online, with the Brotherhood's main site serving as a central hub. The central site both framed the personal ordeals of individual members and heightened the effects of personal narratives using multimedia. Abdul Galil al-Sharnoubi, the editor-in-chief of the Brotherhood's official website, has called this "human element" a successful part of the Brotherhood's online strategy. In an interview with Al Jazeera.net al-Sharnoubi described his approach as "making communications and contacts with various media, confirming that the most important element in the media equation is the human element, which the Muslim Brotherhood possesses."^{xliiii} These personal narratives are enhanced by the fact that many of the younger bloggers are sons and daughters of imprisoned Muslim Brothers, thus giving the Brotherhood a human media face set against the backdrop of accounts of suffering under the Mubarak regime.

These compelling personal narratives often succeed in breaking-in to other media formats, as in the case of a blog dedicated to imprisoned MB member Hassan Malek,^{xliiii} one of the movement's leaders arrested in a February 2007 crackdown.^{xl} Created by his eldest daughter Khadiga, the blog features videos dedicated to the portrayal of her father's suffering. One of these segments posted on YouTube entitled, "Return my

father,” depicts the pleas of his youngest daughter Aisha for her father's release from prison.^{xli} But perhaps the most significant figure in the Brotherhood's blog culture has been Abdel Moneim Mahmoud, also a Brotherhood member detained early in 2007 for belonging to an illegal organization and defaming the Egyptian government.^{xlii} Mahmoud originally saw his blog "*Ana Ikhwan*," which can be translated as "I am the Brotherhood," as a way to publish his experience of being imprisoned as a member of the MB.^{xliii} While his blog presents a powerful Brotherhood-centered narrative of political events such as the military tribunals of Muslim Brothers and stories of members who have been targeted on his English language site, the level of visibility Mahmoud has achieved also embodies a challenge to the Brotherhood that blogging potentially poses: reformist minded individuals can now openly challenge the policies of the conservative organizational leadership.^{xliv}

Challenges to organizational dynamics

The MB as a political entity has developed from a highly-secretive, hierarchical, antidemocratic organization led by anointed leaders into a modern, multi-vocal political association driven by educated, knowledgeable professionals.^{xlv} The ability of blogs to empower the voices of more moderate, tech-savvy members may further threaten the authority of more conservative leaders. In his blog, Abdel Monem Mahmoud has leveled a series of critiques of the conservative aspects of the recently published draft of the Brotherhood's program as a political party.^{xlvi} These entries sparked a variety of responses, to which Mahmoud responded by arguing for a moderate and open agenda for the Brotherhood.^{xlvii} This public display of internal disputes has been met with criticism from within the ranks of the Brotherhood.^{xlviii} Indicative of how blogging has enabled moderate Muslim Brothers like Abdel Monem Mahmoud to publicly critique policies set forth by the group's more conservative leadership, some suggest that this debate has even led to the withdrawal of the recently issued draft of the Brotherhood's program.^{xlix} The airing of this internal debate in cyberspace may portend coming challenges to organizational unity.

Ahmad Abdel 'Atti, a more senior Brotherhood blogger, has addressed this issue in his own blog. He recognizes that some might perceive blogging as threatening to the inner-workings of the Brotherhood and its secrecy, and that this is a challenge that the organization has not yet addressed.ⁱ Despite this, he suggests that the leadership will be able to contain any internal division, and that although diversity between generations is in fact a double-edged sword, youth should be encouraged to use this technology and not be criticized for doing so.ⁱⁱ He stresses that blogging has provided the Brotherhood with media capabilities it previously did not enjoy in reporting on issues of corruption, torture, military tribunals and the arrest of organization leaders.ⁱⁱⁱ He therefore calls for a top-down initiative promoting cooperation with bloggers in an effort to implement blogging as part of a larger media project.ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Abdel 'Atti's call for internal consensus reveals how media technology that allows individuals to influence media discourses might present a challenge to the organizational norms of opposition groups.

The case of the IAF in Jordan

The IAF is the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordanian politics. Following the legalization of political parties in Jordan in 1992, the IAF was created with the intention of providing a common platform for all Jordanian citizens who sought the application of Islamic principles to political life in the country.^{liv} The Brotherhood's decision to form a political front, which came after much internal debate, offered the organization a legal path to political mobilization and provided a means to broaden its reach and influence by appealing to independent Islamists.^{lv} Despite the inclusion of independents in its platform and democratic internal governance, the IAF has yet to craft a separate identity from that of the Jordanian Brotherhood.^{lvi} The recent self-imposed disbandment of the Jordanian Brotherhood's Shura Council and the call for new elections within the organization in the wake of the IAF's recent electoral defeat this past November suggest that the fates of these organizations remain intertwined.^{lvii}

Even before the legalization of political parties in 1992 and the creation of the IAF, the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan enjoyed a less antagonistic relationship with the Hashemite regime relative to the case of the MB in Egypt. Historically, the Brotherhood

was used by the regime as a counterweight to Nasserist Pan Arabism,^{lviii} however its agenda became increasingly opposed to state policies over the course of the 1980s.^{lix} Being the best-organized political movement in Jordan^{lx} the Brotherhood achieved significant victories in the 1989 general election, taking 40 percent of parliament and establishing themselves as the most formidable opposition force to the Hashemite regime.^{lxi} Despite the short-term political liberalization that Jordan enjoyed in this period with the resumption of parliamentary elections and political parties, this policy can be seen as merely a “survival strategy”^{lxii} employed by a regime that was attempting to placate domestic discontent with economic hardships and the peace process with Israel.^{lxiii} Furthermore, the one-vote law introduced in 1993 that greatly limited the ability of the IAF to win seats in parliamentary elections,^{lxiv} and continues to be a point of contention in the group’s political platform,^{lxv} indicates that the regime is perhaps more concerned with keeping the IAF in check rather than allowing them any advantage.

The inconsistent nature of the relationship between the IAF and the regime on parliamentary issues, fluctuating between cooperation and marginalization, is also evident in their media dealings. After the brief democratic opening in the early 1990s, amendments to the media laws were introduced aimed at rolling back any gains the movement might have made. These included tighter press regulation passed in 1997, which instigated outcries from the opposition, human rights observers and liberals. Under the new laws, most of Jordan’s weekly papers were shut down around the time of the parliamentary elections. This, in addition to discontent over the signing of the peace with Israel, prompted the Brotherhood to boycott the 1997 elections.^{lxvi} The regime was then able to pressure a new, more compliant parliament to pass even more restrictive press legislation^{lxvii} that would become the controversial 1998 Press and Publications Law.^{lxviii}

More recent measures taken by the government to constrict press freedoms have been criticized by international and local observers alike. A recent report by Amnesty International states, “There is absolutely no respect for the right to inform and be informed when someone wants to express opposition to the monarchy for criticizing the regime’s leading players.”^{lxix} Jordanian blogger and columnist for the *Al-Dostour* daily Batir Wardam suggests that, despite parliament’s announced plans to increase press freedoms, recent amendments made to the Press and Publications Law in 2007 legalizing

the imprisonment of journalists for publishing materials that infringe upon the national unity and integrity of the state have been justified under the pretext of terrorism. He goes on to say that these developments demonstrated the government's desire to maintain its hegemony over the media, even in an age of opening.^{lxx} But this time around, the IAF reportedly supported this new legislation in parliament to the outspoken dismay of more liberal critics of the regime.^{lxxi} Such a stance, despite the fact that previous amendments hurt the IAF, indicates the presence of a rift between outspoken advocates of media freedom, such as Wardam, and Islamists over restrictive media legislation.^{lxxii}

Electronic media, including that of the IAF, have also been increasingly under pressure, although at a lower level than in Egypt. According to a report by Human Rights Watch, in January of 2006 two individuals were charged with "belittling the dignity of the state" for publishing articles by parliamentarians on the IAF's website.^{lxxiii} Although these charges were dropped, the website itself was allegedly temporarily shutdown this past June.^{lxxiv} More recently, the Jordanian regime has interpreted the restrictive article II of the aforementioned Press and Publications Law to also apply to electronic media.^{lxxv}

In the run-up to the November 2007 parliamentary elections, the Jordanian government issued specific guidelines on broadcast media for electoral campaigns, placing limits on the amount of radio and television time allotted for political advertisements, and levying heavy fees on electoral banners.^{lxxvi} Faced with a situation similar to the Egyptian MB in 2005, the IAF moved online. While the group used various websites in campaigning for the IAF, we have yet to see the level of visibility of the IAF in the Jordanian blogosphere as that of the Brotherhood in Egypt. The IAF's apparent deviation from the more liberal voices in Jordan over such media issues as the recent changes to the Press and Publications Law suggests that its internet efforts will be limited to supporting electoral campaigns and not involved in participating in the broad-based media activism that has been enabled by the blogging phenomenon.

The IAF's online campaign: to inform & counter

This year, the IAF launched an internet media campaign that moved traditional campaigning activities like publicizing candidates, organizing rallies and distributing

literature online. A new website designed specifically for the November 20th 2007 parliamentary elections was recently launched with the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan's website, <http://www.ikhwan-jor.com/> and the IAF's official site, <http://www.jabha.net/>, playing supporting roles.

The address of the website, <http://www.20112007.com/>, is simply the date of the election, thus putting electoral success at the center of the IAF's online strategy. The site informs users about the IAF's program and candidates, and counters mainstream local media coverage casting the IAF in a negative light. While other sites existed before, the current election website is significant in that it is the first IAF site designed explicitly as a campaigning tool. The current efforts of the IAF resemble those of the MB in Egypt in the run-up to the 2005 elections whereby online media was used to inform the public and counter government media restrictions and to mobilize constituents.

This website provides information on Jordan's electoral law and details of its amendment in 2001,^{lxxvii} and explains broader aspects of the party and MB's reasons for entering elections and their goals.^{lxxviii} These points are listed in a document entitled, "The most prominent features of the electoral program for the IAF's parliamentary candidates."^{lxxix} Here Jordanians can see the group's stance on internal issues, such as its desire to reform legislation and address social issues in all aspects of Jordanian society, including women's rights, and matters of foreign policy, namely supporting resistance in Palestine and Iraq.^{lxxx}

The site also listed all parliamentary candidates with IAF nominees highlighted,^{lxxxi} and biographical profiles for their candidates.^{lxxxii} These profiles featured their educational and professional backgrounds, but also any previous affiliation they might have had with Islamic charitable organizations. It also provided phone numbers for each candidate, allowing constituents to directly engage with the parliamentary hopefuls.^{lxxxiii} Overall, the IAF attempted to package its candidates as highly educated, experienced, and personable individuals who have demonstrated interest in the social welfare of Jordanians. This can be seen as a more interactive electronic application of existing print media used by the IAF to inform constituencies of the group's agenda and its candidates.

The new website also worked to counter the stream of negative stories carried in the Jordanian press prior to the elections depicting the IAF as divided, manipulative and politically weak. After the announcement of the IAF's candidate list, the weekly *Al-Majd* alleged discontent among the hard-line members of the Jordanian Brotherhood over the fielding of more moderate IAF candidates.^{lxxxiv} In an apparent effort to dispel the image of internal divisions in the organization's leadership, the website has featured stories of rallies attended by thousands in support of the IAF.^{lxxxv} The party also refuted ambiguous allegations circulated in Jordanian papers of a deal between the IAF and the Jordanian government. The IAF site countered that the purpose of the meeting was for the party to complain to the government about electoral irregularities and violations^{lxxxvi} during past municipal elections and to agree upon measures to ensure the legitimacy of the upcoming parliamentary elections.^{lxxxvii} The website also responded to an editorial featured in the November 16th edition of *Al-Ghad* criticizing the IAF's adoption of the campaign slogan "Islam is the Solution" as a means to play on people's emotions and achieve power rather than provide a practical political program.^{lxxxviii} On behalf of the IAF the author counters, saying the group is legitimately pursuing this electoral program in the interests of all those who yearn for the implementation of Islamic principles.^{lxxxix}

Most recently, on the day of elections the website provided updates from its correspondents in the field who reported any alleged irregularities at polling stations including the buying of votes, bussing in of voters from other districts to vote, and the restriction of access of non-state press agencies to polling centers.^{xc} Statements issued by the IAF's Supreme Electoral Committee calling for an end to these violations were also featured on the website.^{xcii} While the IAF has attempted to use websites to support its campaigning efforts and counter negative press, it does not yet appear that the group has been active in employing blogging to the degree of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.

The IAF and the Jordanian blogosphere

In the Jordanian blogosphere, the Islamist presence is largely overshadowed by liberal bloggers, many of which have been critical of the IAF. According to an article that appeared in a new Jordanian weekly publication *Al-Sijil*,^{xcii} Jordanian blogs are mostly

used by journalist to re-post their articles from newspapers,^{xciii} while liberal blogs lament setbacks in Jordanian democracy.^{xciv} While some have covered issues pertinent to the recent elections,^{xcv} there do not yet appear to be any blogs that directly support the IAF.^{xcvi} Furthermore, the critique of the IAF by some of Jordan's most vocal bloggers over its stance on the recent changes to the Press and Publications Law is indicative of a blogosphere that is inhospitable to the IAF. This, taken with the fact that Jordan has yet to witness suppressive measures to the degree that has been witnessed in Egypt, suggests that the Jordanian blogosphere predominantly remains an alternative space for the discourse of liberal minded individuals, rather than an effective medium for the mobilization of the Islamist opposition.^{xcvii}

Additionally, other factors related to the group's organizational dynamics may inhibit IAF blogging. Since the Egyptian MB has had to ally with other political organizations in order to field its candidates for parliamentary elections, the group has consistently wavered between being a social organization and a political party. The relatively more permissive environment of Jordan has allowed the IAF to serve as an official political party entity on behalf of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan, allowing boundaries between the grassroots activities of the Brotherhood as a social organization not to conflict with the political program of the IAF. The Egyptian MB, on the other hand, has created space for an individuated form of grassroots political activism by a younger tech-savvy generation of Muslim Brothers.

Conclusion

Both the IAF and the Egyptian MB have used official websites in support of election campaigns. While blogging is clearly the superior platform in terms of creating humanizing, personalized narratives about individual members and thus the group as a whole, the case of the MB has demonstrated that attempts to incorporate this platform into a broader media campaign can pose significant challenges to leadership structure and message unity. Furthermore, the disparity between the MB and the IAF towards blogging has demonstrated that a group's proclivity towards this form of media also depends on the broader internet media context within which these groups operate and their compatibility with dominant discourses within the blogosphere. These factors force

us to look beyond their ostensible political agendas in order to understand how and why they embrace new media technologies. In the Arab world this dynamic will develop further as internet penetration rates increase.

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ⁱⁱ <http://www.internetworldstats.com/af/eg.htm>.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.internetworldstats.com/me/jo.htm>.

^{iv} For a comprehensive assessment of Internet penetration in the Arab world see, Vincent, Peter, and Warf, Barney, "Multiple geographies of the Arab Internet," *Area* (2007), Vol. 39, No.1, pg. 83. On expansion of access, see, <http://opennet.net/research/profiles/egypt> and, <http://opennet.net/research/profiles/jordan>.

^v The concept of an Internet-enabled 'counter-public sphere' is derived from Jurgen Habermas's 'public spheres', whereby this technology provides marginalized groups with an inexpensive means to establish a sphere of media discourse that accompanies their forms of organization and protest. See, Downey, J. and Fenton, N., 'New media, counter publicity and the public sphere', *New Media & Society*, Vol. 5 (2), 2003, pp. 185-202.

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^{xiii} Rugh, pg. 122.

^{xiv} Ibid.

^{xv} See, Antar, Noha, "The Muslim Brotherhood's Success in the Legislative Elections In Egypt 2005: Reasons and Implications," *EuroMesco*: 51, October 2006.

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^{xx} Antar, pg. 14.

^{xxi} Rugh, pg. 122.

^{xxii} Ibid.

^{xxiii} Abou El-Magd, Nadia, "Egypt's Elections Turn Violent; 1 Killed," *Associated Press*, 11 June 2007, accessed from: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/19164327/print/1/displaymode/1098/>, 12 June 2007.

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^{xxv} See, "Egyptian Shura Elections Kick Off with Detentions, Riggings," accessed from: <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/Article.asp?ID=1368&LevelID=2&SectionID=94>, 12 June 2007.

^{xxvi} Author's translation of video archive entitled, "Actions and Events – The Forging of the Shura Elections," accessed from: <http://ikhwanonline.com/Media/MediaView.asp?AlbumID=107&MainCatID=3&SubCatID=16>, 12 June 2007.

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