

“My Life is More Important Than Family Honor:” Offline Protests, Counter-Cyberactivism, and Article 308

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Abstract

In summer 2012, protests erupted in Jordan in light of several high-profile enactments of Article 308 of the Penal Code, or “Rape Law,” that allows rape charges to be dropped if the perpetrator agrees to marry the victim, which were organized offline and aimed to create a groundswell of public support for changing gender inequities in society rather than political and legal structures. Users of social media were quick to deride and disparage the protests and protesters in highly visible and aggressive ways. This case demonstrates that the Internet can simultaneously act as a vehicle for resisting social exclusion and gender segregation through cyberactivism, while also serving as a mechanism for reinforcing preexisting cultural norms through, what I call, “counter-cyberactivism.” Such displays amplify the argument that the Internet serves as a space for online cultural performance of offline life, which enables the capacity for both cultural change and durability simultaneously. I conclude with the implications of this case for the online, virtual umma.

Keywords

Jordan, activism, cyberactivism, gender

Introduction

One afternoon in late June 2012, I drove from downtown Amman towards the University of Jordan. This is a busy route, and there is typically a predictable degree of traffic and congestion. This particular day the traffic was the worst I had ever seen: where it would normally take 20 or 30 minutes for the entire five mile trip, it took me more than three hours to pass through the 300 feet of the Interior Circle, or *Duwaar Dakhiliya*. As I emerged from the Interior Circle headed towards Sport City, or *Medina Riyadhiya*, I saw hundreds of women standing alongside the street holding white signs with black Arabic writing that read individualized statements such as “My life is more important than family honor,” and “No to Article 308.” Passersby slowed to a crawl to read the signs that varied with each protester. Some

stopped their cars to get out and join in on the protest. Some honked their horns in support. Some shouted out their windows at the protesters to go home or worse, and still others expressed frustration that this protest was interrupting their daily commute.

The women lining the Interior Circle and its approaches came out to protest a culture and society that supports Article 308 of the Jordanian Penal Code, which stipulates that male perpetrators of rape are exonerated from their punishments – including the death penalty – if they agree to marry the victim. The protesters that June afternoon were not agitating for governmental reform of legal systems in place as they had during the Arab Spring protests, which were typically unsuccessful at mobilizing the masses and at securing political change. Rather these protests were an attempt to build a groundswell of societal support against enactments of the law and in support of victims of rape in Jordan.

The online response to the offline protest was highly notable: it was Internet-based and asserted negative, disparaging, and deprecating comments and character assassinations about the women protesters and the method and topic of protest. In particular, male users of social media, particularly Facebook, were quick to discredit these protests with altered photos and commentary and deride and disparage the protesters in highly visible and aggressive ways. In this article, I argue that Article 308 protests and backlash demonstrate that the Internet can simultaneously act as vehicle for resisting social exclusion and gender segregation, while it also serves as a mechanism for reinforcing preexisting cultural norms through, what I call, “counter-cyberactivism.” Such displays underscore the idea that Internet serves as a space for online cultural performance of corresponding offline life, enabling the capacity for both cultural change of gender norms and durability of patriarchy simultaneously. I conclude by discussing the implications of this case for the online, virtual *umma*.

Cyberactivism, Counter-cyberactivism, and Performance

The Internet has been promoted by some as a panacea for self-expression in otherwise authoritarian contexts throughout the Middle East (for a varie-

ty of discussions on this point, cf. the following: Anderson 2013; Kalathil and Boas 2010; Khamis and Vaughn 2011; Sreberny 2001; Wheeler 2006a, 2006b; among many others). Some have gone so far as to call such assertions “utopian claims” (Dimaggio, et al. 2001:307). Still, there is some support for a tempered optimism in the Middle Eastern contexts, as has been revealed in the last few years.

Cyberactivism has proven to be one way to largely bypass these authoritarian states to reach an international audience, often with messages underscoring needs for political and social reform. Cyberactivism is defined by its position as “both subversive to the state” and “empowering to the public” in the creation of new forms of public engagement (Radsch 2008:8). It “refers to the use of digital media technologies and social media platforms for sociopolitical contestation” as well as “contentious politics” (Radsch 2012b:5-6). Furthermore, the goal of cyber activism is “often to create intellectually and emotionally compelling digital artifacts that tell stories of injustice, interpret history, and advocate for particular political outcomes” (Howard 2010:145).

Blogs, for example, are often cyberactivist avenues for information sharing that reside beyond state control in many Middle Eastern countries, and bloggers can experience relatively wide personal freedoms of expression (Radsch 2008:7), discussing otherwise forbidden women’s issues such as sexuality (Amir-Ebrahimi 2008) or politics (Beckerman 2007), and even adopting a purposefully deceitful and false identity to do so (Bennett 2011). As early as 2007, bloggers in Egypt - who were frequently activists using this Internet platform and their politically influential positioning in agitations against the state - were arrested in a larger crackdown in freedom of expression, beginning with Kareem Amer (Radsch 2008:9-10). By virtue of their cyberactivism, activist bloggers were granted “access to the resources of the international media and human rights organizations and transnational activist networks on a level comparable to any other blogosphere except perhaps China’s” (Radsch 2008:11), which many regimes have found threatening and difficult to control. Cyberactivists have also utilized Twitter, and the killing of Moammar Ghaddafi, for example, was among the top ten trending topics on Twitter in 2011 (Radsch 2012b:9).

Women too have utilized such cyberactivism to agitate for often-controversial positions. Depictions of women's cyberactivism often show women as posters, the bloggers, and the activists using the Internet to achieve not only political change but also social and gender-specific cultural change, and often with severe repercussions (Radsch 2008). Radsch (2008:5) describes an incident from 2006 in which dozens of women were sexually assaulted in downtown Cairo while police stood and watched. Bloggers seated in a local coffee shop were compelled to go into the streets and document the sexual assaults by taking pictures and videos. As a result of the cyberactivism of the witnesses, the attacks were covered in the Arab and Egyptian news three days later. "Citizen journalists" also engage in cyberactivism to define resistance "against social justice, harassment, and censorship as part of a broader movement for political reform" by documenting, witnessing, and in making meaning (Radsch 2012b:11). Women citizen journalists were amongst the first to report the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid, and some women citizen journalists and cyberactivists have larger Twitter and blog followings than their country's state newspapers, as is the case with Bahraini writer Lamees Dhaif (Radsch 2012b:11). Cyberactivism through citizen journalism is also filling the gap when the state fails to protect both its citizens and enforce the rule of law.

Cyberactivists are not only organizing in opposition to the state and in affiliations with other, internationally allied networks (Severo and Zuolo 2012). They are also projecting and pushing their modes of sociality from their offline lives into an online presence in expanded and oftentimes new forms of interaction with persons and networks, and may create unexpected or unusual alliances (Piela 2009). "Cyberspace presents a kind of social space wherein practices and imaginaries of self and other, resistance and power shape collective bonds of interactivity" (Rahimi 2011). The Internet is "not only instant and trans-spatial but multilateral, including many participants and connecting many different activist groups" (Salter, et al. 2003:4). Through the Internet, cyberactivism and the online presence of offline actors becomes another, expanded social space in "the marketplace of ideas" (Inger 1984), or more accurately the "online marketplace" of ideas (El-Nawawy

and Khamis 2010:230) in which preexisting cultural norms can be and are projected to a larger community for examination, vetting, and in the cultivation of the self.

As Anderson has discussed, these connections between online and offline social fields and actions are often vexing problems for researchers (Anderson 2013). Internet activism and cyberactivism is reliant frequently on a duality of approach or “an ongoing taking back and forth between cyberpolitics (political activism on the internet) and ... place politics, or political activism in the physical locations at which the networker sits and lives” (Escobar 1999:32). The online-offline relations or “flows” (Castells 1996) between the two realms has also been discussed in terms of a “social thickening” (Sassen 2000) of the global in local sites and an accompanying “hollowing out” of local institutions (Anderson 2013; Dimaggio, et al. 2001). However, as the case of the Article 308 protests demonstrates, there are times in which different strategic approaches to online and offline activism and an assumed coherence between the two prompts a “thickening” of local institutions as part of a perceived local *umma*, while the global in the local is not a primary, or even peripheral, concern.

In fact, construing online-offline activities as primarily moving outwards from actors’ offline lives and into the online modes in ways that reshape socialities “out there” does little to explain the preexisting local forms that are reinforced through the Internet, including the reproduction of gender inequalities (Anderson 2000). Beyond the inequalities reproduced in the “digital divide” (Dimaggio, et al. 2001:310), there are real limitations to the revolutionary power of the Internet, particularly on the issue of gender equity, which can be attributable to offline actors’ preexisting interests in maintaining status quo and patriarchal affluence (Considine 2009). There are, of course, “Internet authoritarians,” just as there are cyberactivists; the Internet is not and does not necessarily make for more democratically oriented actors (Anderson and Hudson 2012). While ultimately the literature confirms strong links of translation and replication between online activism and offline life (Anderson 2013), it is particularly true that, as Considine

indicates, the Internet reflects the society from which it is created, and for women, “the internet reflects this patriarchal society. Language barriers, gender directed lifestyles and traditional domestic role ensure that female online activity is reduced” (2009:141). Frequently when women are online, they - along with their male counterparts - frequently encounter projections and representations of women as repressed and objectified (Considine 2009:135; Rius 1999:23).

Such displays amplify the argument that Internet serves as a space for online cultural performance of offline life (Anderson 2013; Radsch 2008; Rahimi 2011). They are performances in the sense that they build a durable and consistent reputation in their form and content, often with calls for mobilization (Anderson 2013). While Internet activism consists of complex, “meaning-laden performances that carve out spaces of dissent” that link action, affect, and “social affinities” or identities (Rahimi 2011), the same forum and type of Internet activism can be used for the reinforcement and perpetuation of preexisting cultural norms, in this case gender hierarchies. If we understand the Internet as a medium or space for performance of corresponding and preexisting offline perspectives and social relations, which the women protesting Article 308 did, then the web-based responses to Article 308 protests carry a particular sting. Those responses and performances are best understood as, what I am calling, “counter-cyberactivism.” I understand counter-cyberactivism to be defined by online actions conducted in ways that disempower the populace by non-state actors in support of preexisting, offline political and socio-cultural status quos. Counter-cyberactivism is, in many ways, the antithesis of cyberactivism.

While it is true that internet performance is a type of political action (Rahimi 2011), not all Internet performances of political action are necessarily in opposition to the state. They may also be in support of the state. In the case of Article 308 actions, the offline protests were not designed necessarily in opposition to the state, in light of the Arab Spring “failures.” Rather, they represented primarily an offline act to change offline cultural and gender inequities. Meanwhile, the responses to and backlash against Article 308

protests demonstrate that online performances of counter-cyberactivism by non-state actors and counter-cyberactivists can ultimately serve the interests of the state and help maintain legal, social, and cultural status quos.

The case of Article 308 backlash is not the only occurrence of counter-cyberactivism seen in the Middle East in recent years. After the elections in Iran in 2009, for example, the citizens supporters of Iran's regime took to the Internet to demonstrate their positions, mirroring the pro-regime demonstrations on the street (Fowler and Rhoads 2009). The Syrian Free Electronic Army is another example of apparently non-state affiliated individuals engaging in counter-cyberactivism and hacking in order to paralyze and stop the online anti-Assad electronic communications and Internet postings and to reveal the offline locations and identities of the Syrian rebels fighting the Assad regime (Perlroth 2013). In the case of university students in the U.A.E., women, in particular, are more likely to hide their gender in their online activities because of the potential for prejudice and differential treatment, (Sokol and Sisler 2010:14), in what I call counter-cyberactivism. There are other examples, however they are often difficult to locate. Stories of counter-cyberactivism are less frequently discussed, likely due to their support of otherwise unpopular regimes and positions. The case of Article 308 demonstrates that despite the fact that the protests were primarily offline, the online backlash of counter-cyberactivism by non-state and pro-regime actors supporting the gender status quo renders the Internet simultaneously holding the capacity for resisting social exclusion and gender segregation while also serving as a mechanism for reinforcing pre-existing cultural norms and gender inequities. Such displays further amplify the idea that the Internet also serves as a performance space for the correspondences between online and offline interests, enabling the capacity for both cultural change and reproduction simultaneously.

Article 308: The Rape Law

Article 308 of the Jordanian Penal Code is presented in the context of other articles that discuss sexual conduct and misconduct, including Article 292,

which defines the legal terms for rape and stipulates punishments based on the ages of the victims. It reads:

Whoever has sexual intercourse with a woman, other than his wife, without her consent – whether through coercion, threat, deception, or fraud – is punished with hard labor for no less than 15 years. Any person who rapes a girl under 15-years-old is punished by death, and with hard labor for 20 years if the victim is between the ages of 15 and 18 (Selfscholar 2012).

Another translated version of Article 292a reads, “Whoever has sexual intercourse with a female (other than his wife) without her willingness whether through the use of force or threat or deception or trickery, will receive a temporary prison life-sentence period” (Sonbol 2003). As the penal code indicates, rape is legally recognizable only between a man and a woman to whom he is not married. As a result, rape within the context of a marriage is legal in Jordan. When rape occurs, the punishment of hard labor or a prison sentence is based on the age of the victim, and the rape of a child under age 15 is punishable by the death penalty.

The penal code goes on to describe the way by which these punishments can be evaded in Article 308:

If a valid contract of marriage is made between the perpetrator of any of the offenses mentioned in this section, and the victim, the prosecution is suspended. If judgment was already passed, the implementation of the punishment upon the sentenced person is suspended (Selfscholar 2012).

Punishments for committing an act of rape – including the death penalty for the rape of a girl under the age of 15 – can be evaded by marrying the victim. The enactment of this Article is contingent upon the perpetrator of rape not divorcing the victim/wife for at least three years, though the goal of such policy enactments is to evade punishments rather than to build a cohesive family structure.

In 2012 there were several high-profile reports of rape and enactments of Article 308, which is colloquially referred to as “the Rape Law,” that gained national and international news and media attention. In April 2012 a 19-year-old male kidnapped a 14-year-old girl from Zarqa, and, according to one report, the man’s wife was also in on crime, assisting in the kidnapping (Khaberni 2012). He took her to the desert where he proceeded to rape her for three consecutive days (AFP 2012b). The police found them during a routine desert patrol, returned the girl to her family, and arrested the male. The court sentenced the male to death by hanging, but he managed to produce a very recent marriage certificate between himself and his victim signed by a judge (Tarawnah 2012). The court then stayed the execution but added that it will be reinstated should the boy divorce her without a “justifiable cause.” The male avoided his death sentence by agreeing to marry the girl, in accordance with Article 308. In June 2012, a man talked a 15 year-old girl into entering an empty apartment where he proceeded to rape her (AFP 2012b). He sought to marry the girl to avoid prosecution. Cases such as these were brought to light at an alarming rate.

The moral outrage that these enactments sparked is not surprising. This has been a widely debated policy, particularly by women’s rights groups and affiliates including the International Women’s Right’s Action Watch (IWRRAW), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and in international forums such as the International Conventions on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). In 2003, IWRRAW observed that, “In the case of rape, cultural and social traditions coupled with inadequate laws inform discriminatory legal practices” (Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Canada 2003).

Many notable Jordanian leaders spoke out against these legal acts as well. Jordan’s first State Minister for Women’s Affairs, Nadia Hashem Alul said, “This issue must be effectively addressed. I think Article 308 should be amended to ensure justice to rape victims” (Pearlman 2012). Hani Jahshan, a forensic pathologist and physician at the Ministry of Health and the Fami-

ly Protection Directorate agreed, “Society believes that a female’s virginity must be preserved until marriage. This forces girls to marry their rapists in order to protect her reputation and avoid social problems” (AFP 2012a).

Furthermore, Twitter lit up with popular responses to these public enactments of Article 308, including comments expressing incredulity such as “Department of WTF?!” “horrified,” and “ridiculous” (Pearlman 2012). A Facebook group, “No to Article 308” gained over one thousand members (Al-Urduni 2012). Online petitions to change the law were signed by thousands of people, both inside and outside of Jordan (iPetition 2012). The outrage expressed in social media spanned both official and unofficial reports and were put forth by both women and men.

Despite the public outrage, not everyone found the enactments of Article 308 to be so morally reprehensible. Dr. Hussein Khazai, a sociologist at the University of Jordan, came out in support of Article 308 with “evidence” that women are sociologically different from men. He claimed that women have the ability to overcome the ordeal if they have the desire to do so, which is achievable by fulfilling their social roles as wives and child bearers (AFP 2012b). While Dr. Khazai later retracted his comments (Abu Subh 2012), Jordan’s first female coroner, Israa Tawalbeh, came out vocally in support of Article 308, saying there is

nothing wrong in Article 308 as such. The problem is how some local and international human rights groups interpret the law. Actual rape cases are rare in our society. Sometimes, girls under 18 lose their virginity to force their families to accept marriage to their boyfriends. The law categorizes this as rape. [It] solves problems for some . . . I think the law fits our society and reality. It protects the girls by forcing attackers to marry them (AFP 2012b).

Comments invoking the “protection” of girls are often used as code for the protection of the girls against honor killings. In honor killings, the honor of the family - broken by a female’s sexual misconduct, broadly-defined - once lost, can be restored through the death of the female or the legal binding

of the two persons in marriage. The female's "sexual misconduct" in these cases can also include being a victim of rape. Article 308 provides women a marriage to their rapist when, at least in theory, their only other alternative would be death.

Jordan is considered to have a relatively high-rate of honor killings in the Middle East, including one-third of all murders in 1999 (Cuomo 2013), which constitutes approximately 15-20 women per annum (IRIN 2007). Perpetrators of honor crimes are typically offered lenient sentences, if charged at all. Article 98 of the Penal Code, for example, stipulates shorter sentences of only three months to two years in prison for murders committed in a fit of anger. As Iman Aqrabawi, the Gender-Based Violence-Unit Manager at Queen Rania's Jordan River Foundation, explained it, "the raped woman should be thankful to her abuser for marrying her, and not leaving her alone" (Pearlman 2012). The logic is that it is better to be seen in Jordanian society as a divorced woman than a raped women. In 2010, there were 379 cases of reported rape (AFP 2012b), of which the percentage that resulted in an honor killing, marriage of the victim to the perpetrator, or some other outcome are unknown.

Moral failings of Article 308 aside, there are legal problems with Article 308 as it is currently written. For example, if a woman or a minor girl is raped by more than one male, to whom will she be married? The law does not provide a clear sense of how to resolve a gang rape, for example. Article 308 also does not recognize the concept of consent in marriage, in a turn derived from medieval Islamic jurists (Ali 2008), thereby rendering rape of a wife legal within the confines of a marriage relationship in full accordance with the law. Additionally, acts of sodomy against young females or males – or other acts of rape, such as those committed with foreign objects or non-penile body parts – are neither recognized as rape nor reconcilable through Article 308. In particular, a marriage between an adult male perpetrator and a young boy neither resolves the sexual misconduct of sodomy perpetrated nor is recognized legally or socially in Jordan. Though there is a legal framework in place for *hat'ird*, or sexual offenses of a lesser status, including emotional,

verbal, and physical assault or personal injury in which there is no forced vaginal sex by a male (Sonbol 2003:204-206), these offenses and their legal resolutions do not prompt the same ire as enactments of Article 308.

Furthermore, many human rights activists indicate that there is no political desire or will to alter the laws surrounding gender inequities and sexual crimes (IRIN 2007). In light of the failings of the Arab Spring to facilitate political reform (Sadiki 2012, 2013; Seeley 2012; Tobin 2012), this is an important contextual point. One anonymous blogger captured a commonly-held sentiment about changing Article 308, indicating that

Realistically speaking, changing such a law won't come that easy nor quickly. Our esteemed parliament, who only manage to be productive when it comes to their pensions hearing, still have about 30 temporary laws to vote on, I've been told (Anonymous 2012:2012).

Ahmed Shaath, a Palestinian media analyst, echoed such sentiment by stating that repealing Article 308 “does not stand a chance without interference by royal decree or a high court to reverse it... it seems nothing will change by a popular referendum” (Shaath 2012). Freedom House has been unsuccessfully pushing for the repeal of Article 308, among other forms of legal discrimination against women, since 2005 (Abu Hassan 2005).

As it became clear in Jordan that political protest during the Arab Spring was largely disappointing and ineffective, many activists and protesters turned to offline movements to change their “Islamic cultural milieu” and understandings of cultural and social tradition rather than seeking to alter the law and women’s legal standings. In a shift from the focus of the Arab Spring’s aims of political and legal change, culture and society became the objects of offline protest of Article 308.

Protesting Article 308

In June, 2012, Jordanian women and men began taking to the streets in protest of Article 308 (Azzeh 2012; Geasey 2012). Through the collective forces of several women’s rights organizations in a performance of solidarity,

rather than each one protesting on their own, women's groups organized a combined series of protests. Toleen Touq led the charge, bringing in the online and offline groups "308 is a Crime," "Mush Shatara," "My Mother is Jordanian and Her Citizenship is My Right," and "No Honor in Crime." For the first time, these four groups, which were united online, came united in an offline protest against Article 308 under the banner of "Like me, like you," or "*Zayyee Zayyak*."

On June 25 – the day I drove through *Dakhiliya* Circle – more than 200 people linked arms in the Circle and along Queen Alia Street, holding white signs with a basic black font and printed slogans in Arabic that read, "You're killing us with your honor;" "I am not your honor;" "Rape has become a national duty;" "My life is more important than family honor;" "I am not obligated;" and "Like me, like you," among others. Largely contested, these protests were highly visible and disruptive to traffic flows, as they lined the busy intersection of *Dakhiliya Circle* near *Medinah Riyadhiya* or Sport City, which was the same location as the most contested Arab Spring protests in March 2011. In addition to the fact that the protests had a special space for the inclusion of passersby and those that wished to join in the protest, with women in particular as welcome additions, there were several unique differences between these protests and Arab Spring protests.

The aims and objectives of the protests were different from Arab Spring protests. "They weren't there, as in the past, to protest one policy or one outrage against the rights of women. This protest covered a broad swath of deeply rooted issues. Simply, it was to stand for their equality" (Geasey 2012:32). In a shift from Arab Spring protests, the protests against Article 308 aimed to create a groundswell of public support for changing the culture of society more than the legal structures in place. These were protests against patriarchy more than against politics, "calling daily practices into question" (Geasey 2012:76). The messages targeted both men and women, even using humorous approaches, as one sign held by a male protester read, "I do the dishes too," as well as a more serious leveling of cultural charges of abuse (Atallah 2012). According to Rozan Khalifeh, one of the organizers,

“If this was a political issue, a revolution would solve it. But you can’t have a revolution to change people’s minds” (Geasey 2012:76).

It is important to note that these protests were conducted without government permits, in a break from Arab Spring protests (Tobin 2012). Previously, the requirement for governmental permits enacted as part of the Consent to Hold Rallies in the Public Assembly Law was a threshold criteria for any and all protests. Quietly suspended in 2011, offline protests of Article 308 were some outcroppings of this legal alteration. Beginning in 2012, small groups of protesters took advantage of this procedural change and gathered in Fourth Circle outside the Office of the Prime Minister, where they held signs and shouted slogans in protest of Article 308, “but no one paid attention” (Geasey 2012:32). They also organized a small flash mob skit against honor killings, and they filmed a short video Rainbow Street, a popular street for socializing at local cafes and shopping for crafts. But the protests on June 25, 2012 in *Dakhiliya* Circle proved the most visible and attention grabbing; they were the culmination of these early offline and online efforts, activism, and protests bringing together otherwise disparate efforts against Article 308 in a moment of solidarity. At the June protest, Khalifah said, “We needed every demonstrator to be able to advocate for our movement if approached by the media, and we knew that we would only be as strong as our weakest link” (Atallah 2012). In a moment of reflection prompted by the Arab Spring, protesters took advantage of newly legal possibilities to gather offline, and by fighting culture and social pressure protesters were depicted by some online as “brave” and “daring” (Atallah 2012).

The June protest was also notable as Facebook and other social media were eschewed for person-to-person offline contact in organization, mobilization, and engagement. Protest organizers utilized their position as a community of online and offline connected political outsiders to mobilize for their demonstrations by way of personal invitations to friends and colleagues of like minds, which allowed their energy to be focused on people who were interested in protesting cultural practices. One of the participants, Dana Suleiman said, “We want a feminist movement formed by interested

people and people who believe in the cause, not just to spend time and meet people and then go home,” (Geasey 2012:33,76). Khalifah added about the protesters that “Quality was more important than quantity” (Atallah 2012). In some ways, these protests harkened back to a pre-Arab Spring preference for tempered Internet usage in protest mobilization, while at the same time demonstrating innovation by using protest to engage in culture change of fellow citizens by fellow citizens. These adaptations of protest as a tool for community mobilization speak to an evolving notion of protest efficacy (Skoric, et al. 2011) and hint at a future of heightened internal divisions and protest for change in Jordan (Tobin N.d.).

Backlash: Counter-cyberactivism

The protests of Article 308 and their commentary on daily practices associated with rape and honor killings touched deep emotions on the part of the passersby and the Jordanian public. Some of the reactions were supportive. Passersby would cheer and honk their horns in support; some stopped their cars to participate spontaneously (Geasey 2012). Of the demonstration photos posted on Facebook following the event, many received over one hundred likes, and dozens were shared and re-posted (Geasey 2012). Bloggers covered the events in both English and in Arabic (Anonymous 2012; Amman 2012). News of the protests garnered international news attention as well (AFP 2012b).

Many of the reactions to the protesters themselves, however, were negative. In a change from generalized Arab Spring support for women protesters by fellow Jordanians (Adamczyk 2012; Donger 2011; Helfont 2011), these protesters were subject to the insults, harassment, and defamation by fellow citizens both offline and online. Passersby yelled disparaging comments and threats at protesters as they drove by. In particular, protesters’ pictures and the signs they held were altered and slandered on Facebook and other online social media sites. Via social media and in personal accounts, threats of rape to protesters were in abundance. Even death threats were launched against them.

A glance at the Facebook page for “Zayyee Zayyak” (Frekeeh 2012), which became the online presence for this consolidated group of offline protesters, reveals popular discontent for the protests. One comment speaks to a presumption of women’s so-called nature, “Frankly, I do not understand the purpose of this event, and I do not read in the signs anything other than the timeless and universal stubbornness of women.” Another comment speaks to the content of the signs, and reads, “I am against the slogans in these protests that call for women’s rights; there is no actual link between all of them and instead they are mixing fact and fiction.” Some respondents on Facebook invoked the Quran 33:59 in their lambasting of women protesters, which states, “Oh Prophet, tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to bring down over themselves [part] of their outer garments. That is more suitable that they will be known and not be abused. And ever is Allah Forgiving and Merciful.” One author of a Facebook comment quoted this Quranic verse, and then went on to say:

You women are wrong. God did not say that you should only cover yourselves because that will save you from suspicions and disadvantages; you have exposed yourself during this scandal, which does not reflect your good behaviors and ethics (as you say you’re doing). You say you don’t need the veil, but my sister the Messenger of Allah says: Where is your modesty? (Frekeeh 2012).

As of the time of writing, comments on this Facebook page are still posted and are often unkind and reprimanding of women, highlighting the very attitudes and practices that women were keen to change.

The protesters suffered consequences from their families as well as strangers. Rozan Khalifeh, one of the organizers of the protest, was interviewed on live television during the protest. In the interview, she denounced Article 308, asserting her belief that “it would be better for a raped woman to never marry than wed her rapist” (Geasey 2012:32). When the cameras turned off, Khalifeh’s mother called her cell phone. She was furious with her daughter, convinced that the public and the unretractable statement had committed her daughter to a lifetime without a husband or prospects for marriage.

One of the most prominent images and persons that suffered this backlash from the fellow Jordanian citizenry was the figure below (Figure 1), featuring Dana Suleiman with a poster that reads “My Life is More Important than the Honor of the Family.”



Figure 1: Dana Suleiman with a protest sign that reads, “My Life is More Important than the Honor of the Family” Photo Credit: Dana Suleiman, (Suleiman 2012d)

This image (Figure 1) was altered in ways that underscored the very cultural practices and outlooks that Suleiman was trying to protest. The text in the picture from Figure 1 was edited in a number of ways that slandered and disparaged by claiming her sexual promiscuity. One altered version proclaimed she was only looking for sex and another indicated her brothers should kill her for her actions, and yet another indicated that she was looking for a new boyfriend everyday (Geasey 2012).

Figure 2 is an example of one of those altered images. In Figure 2, the image of Dana Suleiman on the left is the same as the original image in Figure 1.



Figure 2: Side-by-side comparison of original and altered image of Dana Suleiman's protest sign (Figure 1), which reads "My Life is Important to Me, and I Don't Care About Anyone Except Myself" Photo Credit: Dana Suleiman, (Suleiman 2012g)

The image on the right, however, is altered to read "My Life Matters to Me, and I Don't Care About Anyone Except Myself." The captions above the images reveal a self-consciousness about these altered images on the part of the creator: the caption above the original image reads "Photoshop" and the image above the altered image reads "The Real Picture." The creator of these images not only altered the original, but then tried to pass off the altered image as *the original*.

The altered images were also reflective of overt sexual violence. Figure 3 shows a middle-aged Jordanian woman with a sign that reads, "Like Me, Like You." Figure 4 shows the altered picture posted on Facebook. The photo was transformed so that the woman's eyes are blackened out, and a moustache is added. The woman's sign has diacritical marks that were slightly altered in ways that have a tremendous impact on the meaning. The slogan now reads, "My Penis is Like You," demonstrating sexual violence against a woman who is already covered with the *hijab* and, by local standards, dressed modestly and adhering to Islamic commands.



Figure 3: Original sign of “Like Me, Like You” Photo Credit: Dana Suleiman, (Suleiman 2012c)



Figure 4: Altered photo of Figure 3 that reads, “My penis is like you” Photo credit: Dana Suleiman, (Suleiman 2012e)

Beyond sexual violence, the disparaging comments and photo alterations attempted to link female protesters with politically offensive charges of Zionism and a “Zionist Crusader Conspiracy,” as in Figure 5.



Figure 5: Altered photo with a sign that reads, “Like me, like you I want to marry 4 [men]” Photo Credit: Dana Suleiman, (Suleiman 2012f)

The photo in Figure 5 shows an unveiled woman holding a sign, which has been altered to now read, “Like Me, Like You, I Want to Marry 4 [Men].” Similar to Figure 4, the eyes of the woman have been blackened out. In addition to the altered text, a Star of David has been added. In personal correspondence, Dana Suleiman (the woman in Figures 1 and 2) indicated that the protesters had been accused of “Zionist-Crusader Conspiracy.” The disparagement and denigration of the protesting woman is clear: women protesting their rights and Article 308 are as threatening to perceived gender hierarchies as Zionism is to a population of Muslim Palestinians.

In another photo, Figure 6, one commentator added the red text indicating: “These are the ladies of the feminist demonstrations in Jordan behind the undertakings to revolt against the Islamic religion and the Arab customs, values and ethics. Did you know that these women stand in the role as agents of a Zionist Crusade against us?”



Figure 6: Female protesters accused of launching a Zionist Crusade against Islam. Photo Credit: Dana Suleiman, (Suleiman 2012b)

The claims that women – even protesters in full *hijab* – were arbiters of the dismantling of Islam were also found. Figure 7 is one example of this.



Figure 7: Female protesters accused of undermining Islam. Photo Credit: Dana Suleiman, (Suleiman 2012a)

The red text below the picture reads: These are women from the Jordanian feminist demonstrations. And they say ‘Like me like you.’ What does that mean?? Does it mean that men should accept whatever they [the women] refuse to accept from the Quran, such as the male is equal to two females (in inheritance laws)? Or is it the case that women can be married to 4 men (family law)? Who is behind this new undertaking that overruns our prohibitions/tabooos? (Suleiman 2012).

The disparaging of these protests ran on claims from the “natural” self-centeredness of a “typical woman,” to invocations of sexual violence, and from being a part of a Zionist-Crusade, to being a source for the breakdown of the family, legal systems, and Islam itself. Women were publicly smeared, with reputations attacked and personal safety compromised. More than one year later, many of these pictures are still available online. Immediately after the protest, however, these altered pictures found wide circulation on both domestic, Jordanian websites, as well as others in the region.

Ultimately, female protesters suffered harassment for these protests of Article 308 from their friends, family, colleagues, peers and strangers on the street and those on the Internet for opting to adjust their protest in ways that challenged existing structures of gender inequity in popular parlance and socio-cultural practices. In many ways, there is a wider set of socio-economic and cultural vulnerabilities to which the women were exposing themselves by approaching the protest this way, rather than binding themselves with men and wider society in shared political protest against the Jordanian regime.

Discussion and Conclusion

It is easy to point to the backlash to the protests of Article 308 in Jordan and say that the protest of Article 308 was ineffectual and did nothing to change the culture and social milieu of contemporary Jordan. In fact, cases of alleged “sexual misconduct” by women and their resolution through physical violence, honor killings, and enactments of Article 308 are on the rise. In March 2013, one study found that 70 percent of Jordanian women believe

that it is acceptable for a man to hit his wife for her misconduct (Hadadeen 2013). On April 14, 2013 police found the burned and mutilated body of a woman in a suburb in Amman. It was believed to be an honor killing, as a four-month-old fetus was exposed through cuts to the abdomen (AFP 2013b). Just two weeks later, on April 30, 2013, a brother admitted to killing his sister by stabbing her 20 times in the face before slitting her throat in order to “cleanse the family honor” (AFP 2013a). One report in late 2013 indicated that 99 cases of rape had been reported by the end of June 2013, and 95 percent of them – 94 of the 99 cases – had been resolved through enactments of Article 308 (Azzeh 2013). There is clearly a strong resonance between wider public opinion in Jordan on violence against women and gender inequities and the legal statutes in place that entrench, perpetuate, and legitimate them. As Jordanian women have sought meaningful interactions in offline protest of Article 308, the underlying sources for gender inequities are not solely governmental, legal or procedural. Rather, it can be argued that they have deeply situated cultural and social roots.

As Radsch has discussed, sexual violence is not only an offline occurrence (Radsch 2012a; 2012b). It is a particularly powerful threat and a form of intimidation that was used against women during the Arab Spring (Radsch 2012b:22-28), which resides within an Internet context of wide sexual degradation of women (Considine 2009:135). Offline and online sexual violence is a way to silence women. Although the backlash to protests of Article 308 did not include physical violence or virginity testing, the protests were character assassinations invoking the notion that women have brought the dishonor upon themselves. Such counter-cyberactivism invokes symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1979) to reinforce gender disparities. Furthermore, such counter-cyberactivism invoked the tacit approval of the state, thereby adding additional layers of structural inequities and power disparities. As Spender has indicated,

Men talk more often, they talk for longer periods, they adopt ‘centric’ positions (forcing females to hover around; men define the topic, assume the legitimacy of their own view, and override women who do not see the

world in their terms... The only difference between the real world and the virtual world is that, if anything, male domination in cyberspace is worse! (1996:193).

As a result of the intensity of online violence protesters of Article 308 and others experienced, it is not a surprise that women tend to hide their identity and gender in their online performances and activities more frequently than men (Sokol and Sisler 2010:1). This study further supports the findings of Sokol and Sisler (2010), who demonstrated that “although the Internet can largely act as a vehicle for resisting social exclusion and gender segregation, it can also simultaneously serve as a mechanism for reinforcing pre-existing norms within newly-networked traditional communities” (Sokol and Sisler 2010:2). The male domination in counter-cyberactivism that these women experienced is reinforcing these preexisting gender inequities and hierarchies, and even utilizing religious language and positioning to achieve it.

In fact, as El-Nawawy and Khamis point out (2010:229), online discussions and presence of a distinctly Islamic nature have an impact on mainstream Islamic discourses. Echoing Sokol and Sisler (2010), Piela (2009) found that, “digital media had the potential to facilitate a change in power dynamics between genders and cultures in a religious context” by bringing together unusual alliances at the intersection of gender empowerment, new media, and religion (Piela 2009:3). The case of Article 308 and gender inequities, however, reveals underlying problems with casting Muslims as part of a single and homogenous, “virtual *umma*.”

As (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009) discuss, the “virtual *umma*” is an imagined community in cyberspace that can bring together the diasporic Muslims on the Internet. There are times in Islamic social life when the imagined *umma* is transformed into a real community, including the annual pilgrimage to Mecca (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009:114). There are also times when the offline community becomes the “virtual *umma*” through online practices (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009). It is a “vibrant cyberworld” enhancing “constructive dialogue that is needed for strengthening the para-

meters of the Muslim *umma*” (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009:16). However, what happens when those parameters are redrawn, confusion sets in, and authority is unseated, if it was even present to begin with?

So-called feminist offline and online actions in the Muslim world can be highly contentious. As El-Nawawy and Khamis point out (2009), many online and offline Islamic feminist movements have taken on strategies of accommodation rather than conflict (155), exercise “rationality, piety, wisdom, and self-discipline” (154), and do “not apologize for being Muslim or for being a woman” (161). The power of these movements is that they have given women a voice, which may be accepted on certain terms and conditions within the parameters of the online *umma*. However, the case of Article 308 demonstrates that there are times when people, despite a feeling or sense of singularity in a Muslim community, are unwilling to participate in online forums as part of civil discourses on topics that are deeply entrenched and difficult to change; cyberspace then becomes a “non-deliberative public sphere” (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009), reinforcing preexisting cultural norms with exclusionary powers granted to counter-cyberactivists, even amongst those that would otherwise place themselves and others in the imagined community of the “virtual *umma*.”

Despite enhanced Internet technologies and the potentialities of a virtual *umma*, there is a durability to the preexisting gender inequities that is not likely to change. As the backlash to the protests of Article 308 demonstrated, the treatment of women and acceptable forms and types of conduct – sexual and non – is not going to change overnight, either by way of the law and women’s legal standing or through socio-cultural changes. Certainly, changing the legal code and policy also requires changing the culture and the social milieu in which the norms and ethics emerged originally. Mothanna Gharaibeh, one of the men who helped organize the protest indicated, “This is how things change. You cannot just press a button and have people become open minded. You have to have discussion” (Geasey 2012:76). These protests of Article 308 succeeded in entrenching women’s relationships with each other, both on and offline, pushing the question of the role and place of

social media to the forefront, and opening up the discussion to the inclusion of women's voices about the socio-cultural inequities that exist between men and women, in hopes of – someday – going back to the Jordanian government with a groundswell of support that the regime cannot ignore. As things stand now, this is the only hope for political and legal change, and it demonstrates that women are willing to risk their relationships with family and friends, as well as their own reputations in social media, in order to affect it. A big price to pay, but the gain seems to be even bigger.

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