

Sowing the Seeds of The Message: Islamist Women Activists Before, During, and After the Egyptian Revolution

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Abstract

This article focuses on the activities and experiences of a group of Islamist women activists, socialized within the ranks of Islam Online Arabic (IOL). These activists engaged in a range of significant social, political, and media practices, before, during and after the ousting of Mubarak; as individuals, as journalists, as counsellors, as agenda setters and creators of media campaigns. Drawing on longitudinal and ethnographic research, this article is able to highlight and document the continuities in modes of civic engagement and activism across multiple media platforms, organizations, and time. It demonstrates how these women's activism continues to be framed by the (IOL) trope the message, which entails cultivation of self, social, and political awareness. The Egyptian revolution is theoretically conceptualized as a phase of liminality (Turner 1979). Liminality entails upheaval, fear, and promise. The article draws attention to the gendered experiences of the revolution including circumvention of patriarchal structures and the re-negotiations of gender norms. Upon conclusion, it is argued that the message has proven highly adaptable to shifting political scenarios. Indeed, the betwixt and between stage of liminality that Egypt was thrust into after the ousting of Mubarak, was particularly fertile soil for sowing and reaping the seeds of the message.

Keywords

Egypt, activism, gender, public sphere, media studies, Arab Spring

Introduction

In the revolution of January 2011, many young Egyptians turned to participatory and social media in conjunction with real-world organizing and demonstrating. That is, participatory media were used as platforms for political activism, a use that activists had increasingly employed to compliment real-world actions. (...) The revolution did not introduce this phenomenon. (Wall and El Zahed 2011:1341).

Drawing on longitudinal ethnographic fieldwork and research, I will shed light on how particular group of Egyptian Islamist women activists, engaged in a range of significant social, political, and media practices, before, during, and after the ousting of Mubarak. These activist women were all socialized within the ranks of Islam Online Arabic (IOL), often characterized as one of the most successful and influential religious websites worldwide, until its demise in 2010 (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009; Gräf 2008; Hofheinz 2007).

IOL employees were bound together by a strong “institutional narrative” (Linde 2003) that highlighted the message, *wasatiyya* and empowering Arab and Muslim populations through: self, social, and political awareness.

The message entails cultivation of self and social awareness (...) In essence it is a call for the reform of both society and the self. The vision for society is a society that is comprised of socially aware and responsible individuals, who engage in constructive dialogue about a multiplicity of opinions, accept difference, and are able to make informed choices (Abdel-Fadil 2013, emphasis added).

In the following; I shall demonstrate how *the message* lives on in the activities and perspectives of these particular women activists, and how it develops in tact with shifting political scenarios in Egypt. More specifically, I will demonstrate how these women activists participated in the overthrow of Mubarak and the political processes in its aftermath, as: individuals, journalists, counsellors, agenda setters and creators of media campaigns. My focus is on the *actors*, and on these particular women’s interpretations and experiences of their own modes of activism and socio-political and civic engagement, in addition to their gendered experiences of the Egyptian revolution. In this regard, I am following in the footsteps of Moll (2013), Radsch (2012), Radsch and Khamis (2013), Wall and El Zahed (2011), and Winegar (2012). The empirical data presented in this article draws on ethnographic fieldwork amongst these women activists from the beginning of December 2009 until the end of June 2010, and briefer research visits consisting of interviews and/or observation in the spring of 2009, 2011, 2012

and 2013.¹ Thus, this article is able to highlight and document the continuities in modes of civic engagement and activism across multiple media platforms, organizations, and perhaps most importantly, across *time*. Before delving into the activists' experiences, I will briefly introduce the contextual landscape from which they emerged.

Spreading the Seeds - The Message Across Platforms

Amal, Abeer, Reem, and Amina² constitute the core group of activists that are the focus of this article. They all hold journalism degrees and are young media professionals in their twenties or thirties. These activist women, used to comprise the backbone of the social team of IOL, a website that once employed roughly 350 employees in Cairo. IOL came in to being in order to provide a platform, which fused secular disciplines with Islamic teachings, and, to offer users a contemporary and life-relevant Islam (Abdel-Fadil 2013; Gräf 2008). While many of the founders and employees self-identified as Islamist, they also strongly identified with their secular training. The Social Team which dealt with societal issues, family matters and online counselling - was no exception. The activist women that are the subject of this article, are dedicated and qualified female media-professionals, with a commitment to IOL's socio-political goals.

Significantly, these activists have all been part of working environment that placed great importance on developing self reflexivity, political, and social awareness, promoting interpretations of Islam that are compatible with every day and modern life, and bettering gender relations. The following explanation by Kawther AlKholly demonstrates how omnipresent the trope the message was in the IOL professional context:

You know the famous quote from McLuhan "the medium is the message?" Well, we at IOL, are our message. It is part of the context. The organization itself is *the message* (Alkholly 2009).

In 2009 the organization could be said to be *the message*. Yet, as IOL disintegrated in March 2010, due to new ownership and the intense disagree-

ment that ensued, the social team members offered one another consolatory utterances on ways to keep the message alive:

I am thinking of a rose, you know. It is beautiful and has a lovely smell, but it has a short life (...) spreads seeds that can be replanted, and can grow new flowers. (...) I am thinking that IOL may be just that, our rose, and now we have seeds that we can spread and develop elsewhere (Abduh 2010).

Here, IOL counsellor Samar Abduh describes how the seeds of *the message* may perhaps spread across more platforms and audiences due to the disintegration of IOL.

In the wake of the collapse of IOL, Amal, Abeer, Reem, and Amina were among the activists who contributed to setting up and running www.onislam.net, which was online by August 2010, and was initially envisioned as the successor to IOL in order to spread *the message*. In many ways, it was set up as a replica of the old website in terms of services, structure and themes, yet the activists strove to renew their approach. These activists contributed their time, effort and dedication to On Islam. Towards the end of 2011 it became evident that On Islam Arabic was not economically viable in the long-term fashion that the activists had anticipated, and the website's activities had to be downscaled. Mada Foundation for Media Development, was initially set up to operate www.onislam.net, yet proved to be successful in attracting funds for a number of other projects and initiatives. For Amal, Abeer, Reem, and Amina, this has gradually resulted in a wider range of their socio-political activities being affiliated to Mada, rather than On Islam. In the years 2009 to 2013, these women have been active in IOL, On Islam and Mada. In practice, these different organizations were run out of the same offices in the 6th of October City, and operated with similar tasks and/or foci. The activist's affiliation has ranged from full time employee to volunteer in various varieties, depending on the funding situation and their schedule. As time progressed, the activists maintained their links to Mada, yet found paid jobs in other media outlets.³

During the revolution, my research participants were working for On Islam. It is in this capacity Amal, Abeer, Reem, and Amina witnessed and reported from Tahrir.

Witnessing and Reporting the Revolution - From Tahrir: Journalistic Participation

We used to go to Tahrir square, to get a few stories, to publish them the next day (...) We were dividing the days amongst us, because we could not all go to Tahrir (...) Two would be in the office, following the news and publish things ASAP because our work here [office] was also part of the revolution. If you were not transferring, transmitting the truth, reporting these things, who would, right? That's it. So, these were beautiful days! (Interview with Amina, May 3 2011)

Amina makes a claim to contributing to reporting the “truth,” alluding to the importance of countering inaccurate state narratives. Nonetheless, one also gets a sense of the excitement of actually *being* in the square and the teamwork involved in splitting tasks and organizing who stays in the office writing up, and who roams the streets, interviewing protestors. Still, Amina describes how working from the office ought to be seen as “part of the revolution.” This points to the importance of widening the vision of what constitutes a *revolutionary act*, beyond iconic squares of political protest. As argued by Winegar (2012) the majority of Egyptians were not in Tahrir square. Yet, many Egyptians supported the revolution from their homes. For Amina and her fellow activists, participation from home or the office easily took the form of *writing the revolution*:

In the beginning, I did not go to Tahrir, but I was participating in the revolution journalistically, I mean, I was trying to write as many articles as I could and publish them on our website (...) but most of all I was trying to participate through stories (...) in order to communicate my point of view. (Interview with Abeer, May 3 2011).

This quote is not insignificant as it points to gendered modes of protest and participation. While Egypt is not a conservative as for instance Yemen

or Libya, there appear to be parallels in how women activists experienced the uprisings in their countries, in that *writing the revolution* or virtual participation became a means to circumvent patriarchal restrictions preventing them from participating physically (2013:883). In addition to writing for On Islam, Abeer shared her thoughts about the anti-Mubarak protests that hit the nation, on other online platforms. She illustrates how women's interpreting of events and journalistic writing may be seen as *participation* in the revolution. Indeed, she places emphasis on her contribution being a communication of her "point of view," which can be considered an attempt at counterbalancing state media narratives. Reem relates her experiences of being in the square in the following manner:

We were going to the streets, talking to people, extracting what was going on (...) It was a revolution for the entire people (...) for the entire society, so all the people were going to the demonstrations, women, men, children, the elderly (...) So we [journalists in On Islam] took the stories and tales of people from the heart of the square (...) the people were protesting and sleeping over - so we'd look at how people were acting in the heart of the square. What was *different* at this time? At that time, there were a lot of things that were different, even the international newspapers picked up on this, the people who were cleaning the square, the people who helped (medically) treat people in the square, the families that were living close to the square and were sending food and blankets to those who were sleeping over in the square, so (...) all of this we were publishing. (Interview with Reem, May 3 2011).

Reem here, reveals a bit of the feeling of exhilaration that many Egyptians could not stop talking about - and the feeling that Egyptians of all walks of life, all ages and both genders participated in bringing the president down. Reem's description, thus, perpetuates the common claim about this being a revolution for "all" rather than "the few" and/or "the privileged." Yet, as Winigar (2012) points out, the "family friendly" demonstrations were few and far between, and most Egyptians were not in the iconic squares of protest. Still, this is not how the protests were talked about. Reem reveals another key aspect of the way the revolution was spoken of, namely what some repor-

ters dubbed *the Tahrir Republic*, the near magical level of pulling together, including thousands volunteers who made sure Tahrir and the surrounding areas were clean, and ensuring that the protestors were safe, medically cared for and well-fed. Arguing a similar point, Amar (2011:300) illustrates how for many “tahrir Square represented a utopian space that forged a new gendered social contract.”

Similar enthusiasm of *Tahrir Utopia* was expressed in Wall and Zahed’s (2011:1341) study with commentaries such as: “this is the Egyptian people we always dreamed of. I can now say I am proud to be Egyptian.” This euphoria may in itself be a byproduct of what Turner (1979:466) labels *liminality*, that is “the transition from one sociocultural state and status to another.” The sense of pride and dignity is I believe, key. For my research participants, participating in Tahrir as a citizen and demonstrator and being overwhelmed by sentiment may easily intersect with the journalistic tug to translate this exhilaration into reporting.

We had a particular type of communication and reporting, during this period. There is a great difference (...) It’s not just that we write articles about different perspectives, no, we also used to check out what is going on in the society (...) I mean, for example the incidents of the revolution, we were (...) I mean (...) I believe that (...) we had a particular type of reporting on *the social* (aspects) of this period. I mean, it was not only *political reporting* (...) No, but we also had glimpses of the social. (...) We have nothing to do with the governments or the presidents or anything (...) we were in Tahrir square, and we’d come back to our offices and write articles. (Interview with Abeer, May 3 2011).

Here, Abeer struggles slightly with the flow of words and the re-articulation of her journalism practices, which are not only being adapted to a new medium, but also to a new reality, namely that she is participating in a revolution. To solve this predicament, Abeer makes claims to reliability, that is not being on the side of the regime, and uniqueness, that On Islam’s edge is their reporting on the “social aspects” of the revolution. By eye-witnessing

and reporting events the activists are able to counter fabricated narratives. In the words of Radsch and Khamis (2013:883) women activists are thus able to “do something in the face of a patriarchal hierarchy and an authoritarian state.” Abeer’s claim to “distinctiveness” relates to these activists’ longstanding engagement with the goals of reforming, self, society and politics (part of *the message*). This puts a certain socio-political spin on the way they write about how Egyptians are engaging with and experiencing the revolution. It also makes these particular activists well suited to reflect on gendered experiences of participation in the Egyptian uprising.

Gendered Experiences of the Revolution

Listen, no one had really imagined that the ousting of Mubarak might happen. (...) Even for those of us who were in the square [Tahrir] (...) During *the day of rage*, we participated because we felt the wrongdoings and hatred and that we wanted him to go. But to tell the president to go, this was (...) something we did not think could be done like this! But, we learnt a lesson; that frustration creates miracles (...) (Interview with Reem May 3 2011).

Reem’s reference to “miracles” both signals the common and perceived collective sentiment of the astounding overthrow of Mubarak, and, the transition from one social order to another. Indeed, liminality may incite sentiments of disorder and fear:

I was trying to write as many articles as I could and publish them on our website, after the Internet came back. But in the beginning, I was in a phase of massive confusion because I was thankfully [ironic laughter] stuck inside our house, I was not allowed to leave [for demonstrations] I mean, from my father especially, he was calling home everyday to make sure that I was at home. (...) So, I respected his wishes. I did not want (...) I was not against it, I felt, I have to respect the family’s fear for me. But, thank God when everything got a bit calmer, I started to come and go, and see for myself. And after there was a bit of security (at the square) I went for a couple of

Fridays (...) And, my father did not have any objections. (Interview with Abeer, May 3 2011).

This excerpt points to how participation in the demonstrations had a gendered aspect, namely that a number of women may have been prohibited from going to demonstrations. Much like her sisters in Yemen and Libya (Radsch and Khamis 2013), Abeer resolves her need to participate in the revolution, through her online activism and by reporting for On Islam. Fear for the safety of female demonstrators is experienced as a double bind, simultaneously constraining and an emotion to be respected and cherished as an expression of love and caring. The ambiguity in Abeer's stance, resembles Asmaa Mahfouz's famous call to "honourable men" to rush to the square to protect women, and reflects what Wall and El Zahed (2011:1339) have dubbed a *gender jujitsu*; for as these women conquer new spatial territories, they simultaneously call for patriarchal protection. Abeer reveals that she was eventually able to persuade her father to grant her access to the square, which might have been eased by the collective efforts at making Tahrir a zone free of sexual harassment, during those epic 18 days. Nevertheless, Peterson (2011:2) emphasises how "Revolutions are extraordinary times in any society" - another example of which can be seen here:

I did not go to Tahrir the first days. You know, the family was a bit anxious [for me] - a little too much, and I was stuck in the house, so I did not go. But, as soon as the Internet got cut off, and the phones etc. - that was it! (...) The only place we learnt about anything was from the Internet. And, the [state] television was just telling lies, so there wasn't much info (...) when the Internet was cut off, all of us were emboldened to tell our families that there should be no constraints. (...) Every one of us [in group of female friends] was thinking that we need to lift these constraints and we told our families (...) "We are going to break these constraints and go to the square!" And, we actually did go and join the demonstrations several days! (...) But, of course we were not sleeping over (...) I think that all the boys that I know from our street were part of the neighbourhood watch groups and were protecting us in the evenings (...) They were swapping

shifts. One day in the square, the next day in the neighbourhood watch group and vice versa. So it was a beautiful spirit! (Interview with Amina, May 3 2011).⁴

Amina like Abeer experienced the constraints of patriarchal family structures, that prohibited her from being able to experience “the beautiful spirit” in Tahrir square. Yet, when the Internet gets shut off Amina and her friends negotiate new rules of conduct based on the unusual state of affairs - and succeed in altering the rules. Peterson (2011) drawing on the classic work of Turner, writes: “revolutions move a people from one state to another, they usher in a period of liminality in which the world is upside down and old rules do not apply.”

The Egyptian revolution, can be viewed as the overturn of an authoritarian father, by his unruly children, with striking parallels to what went on in the families of Amina and her friends. The patriarchal protectionism while interpreted as love on the one hand, is also perceived by Amina and her friends as exclusion from taking part in one of the most unique moments in Egyptian history, and eventually leads to small revolutions in these families. “transgressions of norms” and inventive ways of “public reflexivity” are according to Turner (1979) signs of liminality, and all appear to be apt descriptions of the re-negotiation of gender norms that Amina and her friends succeeded in. In both Abeer’s and Amina’s case, being professional reporters, might have also eased eventual access to going to Tahrir square. Nonetheless, despite the upheaval of certain social norms, it ought to be noted that the previously mentioned gender jujitsu is not entirely eradicated, since young men act as “protectors” through neighbourhood watch groups and the like and women are still perceived of as in need of male guardians (Ghannam 2013).

The next section, sheds light on how the activists in question counselled fellow Egyptians about their experiences with the revolution, and illustrates the perceived overlap between self and socio-political reform.

Counselling During the Revolution

In the spring of 2011, On Islam was still offering online counselling to its users. This is how my research participants talk of the counselling service and the focus of counselees during this abnormal time:

I replied to a counselling question from a girl, who did not go to Tahrir at all. She has no brothers who can take her and bring her back, and her family were worried about her. She felt shameful for not going to the demonstrations. So, I answered her saying “no of course not, no, you did something good, you honoured your mother and father who were anxious on your behalf, and they need you, they needed you for instance to go get medicine for them, or to see you in front of them in one piece. So, this is not something bad.” In this phase, we do not have to think: I went or I did not go (...) what we need, is to try and build our country. (...) What we need now, is to think of which ideas we want to use to change our country. Not to go around saying: “I’m no good, I did not participate.” (...) It’s not useful at all. I hope that the message reached her, that she does not beat herself up about something that was not in her hands. (Interview with Abeer, May 3 2011).

Abeer tells us of a guilt-ridden girl who was prohibited by her family from physically being at Tahrir, and thus from taking part in the spectacular moment of Egyptian history. While this experience appears to be a common experience amongst many Egyptian women, it is a far cry from the iconic image a revolutionary - namely an angry man protesting in Tahrir square, as argued by Winegar (2012). Abeer’s experiences with her own father are likely to have shaped her attempts to console the girl, by highlighting that the decision to not go was not *hers*, while at the same time reinforcing the importance of abiding by the family’s wishes. In effect, the counselling serves both as a reinforcement of self-autonomy and respect for the constraint of patriarchal family bonds. As previously argued, while a number of young Egyptian women were eventually able to negotiate access to the demonstrations, the company of trusted men (as protectors) was a prerequisite. This

indicates that the state of liminality may lead to the overthrow of certain structures but certainly not all. Abeer's redirecting the focus on to "which ideas we want to use to change our country" is an elegant deflection. It is in this context that *the message* resurfaces:

We were always working with the concept of change and reform, like you mention. But it used to be just talk. No practice. You did tell people: "go out and go change yourself, and go say your honest view," but, this was not there. So it was hypothetical, you know. Now, it has changed, the space has changed, the audience itself, are discussing with you in a different way. I mean you write an article and people share it on their Facebook and then they comment about you, they say for example "Well, you said this and this, but you should have said so and so." (Interview with Amina, May 3 2011).

In 2009 and 2010 Amina and her fellow activists talked about how self-reform was the first step towards societal and political change. At the time, there was a sense that one could not change the political system but one could change individuals. Similarly, I then often heard praise for users of IOL that engaged with the perspectives of a counsellor (Abdel-Fadil 2013). Yet, after the spectacular ousting of Mubarak, Amina sees these types of discussions as a new trend that characterises changing spaces of dialogue online, which are becoming increasingly an arena for exchanging different views, mirroring Egypt's state of liminality. This may be the case. However, Amina's rendering, may also be considered a narrative twist, which serves to strengthen the sense of transition from one social order to another and reflects the sentiment of endless promise ahead. On a similar note of optimism, Reem speaks of a fascinating recent development amongst their website users, after the ousting of Mubarak. In her own words:

The audience itself is changing, well, even the user comments are changing (...) Now, people are even saying that they want a *revolution of the self*: "We made a national revolution, now we want to change to ourselves." This is something very beautiful. (Interview with Reem, May 3 2011).

Intriguingly, new preachers used similar terminology; a new preacher called Moez Masoud's produced a TV show called "Revolution of the Self" shortly after the Egyptian revolution (Moll 2013). However, Reem and her fellow activists have a deep commitment to counseling psychology and psychological wellbeing, which cannot be said of the new preachers (Abdel-Fadil 2012). Indeed, Reem's statement suggests that the revolution has led to a certain level of realization, amongst users, of the entwined goals of self, social and political reform embodied by commitment to *the message*:

A lot of people wrote to us saying, now (...) we want to have a revolution in our personal lives. "We made a revolution in the country but we all have negatives we need to break" (...) to start working from scratch. So, this was also a very beautiful theme and space ... that we can help people with: "ok, you want to create a revolution in your life [because] there is something that is bothering you. If you want to change it, how do you change it? So we can help you with that." And actually, we did (...) we worked a lot on this topic, a holistic approach to the revolution. (Interview with Abeer, May 3 2011).

Abeer, much like Reem, describes that people are in a state of upheaval and renewal or liminality. Abeer makes a number of lofty claims about a changing audience who now call for a revolution of the self. Yet, rather than write these off as mere figments of imagination, it may be fruitful to see this optimism as an effect of a transitional period where all seems possible. According to Peterson (2011:2): "during a social and political revolution the contingent nature of the future engenders a sense of creativity, energy and imagination in which transformational possibilities seem endless." Indeed, stimulating personal, social, and political awareness and reform have been the longstanding goals of these particular activists. The uprisings in 2011, simply provided a unique opportunity to apply the ideas. In the next section, I will delve into how these activists were able to seize these particular political moments.

Working the Nation: Raising Awareness Media Campaigns

Look, we saw that (...) the world has changed, but, we were not qualified as youth. We did not understand politics correctly. (...) All our lives, we were used to not having anything to do with what happens in the country (...) So to be participating in this political sphere is something new for us all. So we had to learn (...) People were criticizing the youth who were in Tahrir, saying that they do not know anything about politics. (Interview with Amina, May 3 2011).

On the one hand, Amina appears to have internalized the paternalistic view of the *inexperienced and naïve youth*, which many of the older generations were perpetuating in the public sphere. On the other hand, she is accentuating a political reality: how she and other youth have no experience in partaking in formal politics. With the new turn of events, Amina deems it essential to contribute to the awareness of others. First, however, she, and her colleagues must educate themselves. Amina elaborates:

It is true that we did not participate in politics before. So, we had to enter onto the path of awareness. We had to explain to people, what is the constitution, and the referendum, which clauses are going to be changed, and why, and if they are not changed, what will happen. And you know there was a campaign saying that people who say “no to the referendum - will go to hell,” and those who say “yes -will go to heaven!” [laughing]. Really! There were people who said this, in the mosques ... and the Salafis, this was really their opinion you know. So, we tried to make it clear to people that “Yes or ‘no’ is *your* [personal] choice, and no-one else’s.” (Interview with Amina, May 3 2011).

In this excerpt, there is a clear link to the old IOL/On Islam counselling goal of helping others build the capacity to make their own decision. Indeed, increasing awareness and enabling informed choices, is key to the message. Amina’s account demonstrates how she and her colleagues continue to sow the seeds of the message, in shifting political scenarios. Framing the information in conversational Arabic and employing the direct form of “you” as an activator, is increasingly becoming a signifier of younger generations of

activists” modes of communication (Wall and El Zahed 2011).⁵ Part and parcel of the democratic schooling in vernacular is the “ABC of Politics” campaign:

We do (...) a group of workshops, “the ABC of politics,” where youth groups come and discuss with expert (...) We start from the very basics, we explain the suppositions which we say that people understand, but they really do not, I mean like, *the government*, like *the head of state*, what is his job? Except for suffocating us, and that’s it, what is his job? [laughingly]. (Interview with Amina, May 3 2011).

Amina’s language is not only colloquial, with talk of “suffocation” it also becomes *slangy*, with clear parallels to Wall and El Zahed’s (2011:1338) analysis of the way Asmaa Mahfouz speaks in her seminal vlog. Moreover, as argued by Wall and El Zahed (2011:1340) by “breaking with traditional modes of political communication as well as gender and age expectations for civic leadership in Egypt,” Amina and her fellow activists can be seen as “suggesting that authentic political action is no longer the realm only of professional politicians.”

Above, the importance of introducing the fundamentals of politics to youth and the audience at large is highlighted. This is done through the series “ABC of politics” which is a series of offline workshops, combined with articles published on the On Islam website. Amina avows that there ought not be any directive advice about which way to vote in a referendum. In other words, the ideal of *not being chosen* for ought to be seen as in line with these activists’ wider goal of empowering people to make their own decisions in their life, including politics. Since the goal is that Egyptians make *informed* decisions in politics, the crash course “the ABC of politics” is provided. The joke about the president’s job description as “suffocating his people” is illustrative of the use of everyday language and even slang is employed in order to reach out to a wider audience. It also offers some comic relief. Amina continues to describe their work with prepping their audiences for the referendum and elections:

And so we started to explain to people, what does a nation mean? How do you create a nation? And what does electing by list vs. by suggestion mean, and what will the election period look like, how do you choose candidates. One of our counsellors had an excellent analysis of all the personalities of the presidential candidates, and as of now includes an analysis of Amr Moussa, al-Baradei, al-Bastawisi (...) all of them (...) an excellent analysis. (...) So, that's beautiful (...) it helps people read the personality of so and so (...) in case he has you fooled with his talk or his looks! I think we will continue with this approach. (Interview with Amina, May 3 2011).

This is an illustration of how the basic education of the masses can feature a specialist's analysis. One of the counsellors provided a psychoanalysis of the personalities of a number of the presidential candidates, prepping the audiences for the upcoming presidential elections. This particular focus is an interesting fusion of the self-social-political reform, integral to the milieu that these activists have been shaped by. The idea of non-directive advice ties into the notion that Egyptians *can* be prepped for democracy:

As for the referendum, here we took the stance, of how to make people aware, how to think, on what grounds, how to think, how to read, how to reach his own decision, this was our thought. We are completely opposed to the idea of someone telling the other what to do and say. You cannot force your opinion on him. You must show how he should form his own opinion (...) There were people directing people to say "no." There were also people urging the nation to say "yes." We reject this idea. We disagree with the concept of someone doing this for you. (...) That was the whole idea behind the revolution, that there was always someone who believed that this nation is not *mature*, that this people is unable to create their own opinion, and therefore we will not give them the chance to form their own opinion. And always (...) the talk about the people not being ready for democracy (...) The revolution rose, took place because of this. So we cannot create a revolution to get rid of something, and then with our own hands reintroduce it, by telling people what to do! (Interview with Reem, May 3 2011).

Reem expresses a clear critique of paternalistic authoritarian concept of “conquer and rule” politics that she and her fellow activists have been attempting to counter in word and deed for over a decade. In many ways, the new political stage in Egypt provided a unique opportunity to take the message to a new level. In Amina’s words:

And to say your true opinion is the first change (...) it is the first exam, so let’s not fail it, the first democratic step. This is our first exam of democratic thinking. So, that’s it if we do not pass, all of this (the revolution) was for nothing. (Interview with Amina, May 3 2011).

Both Reem and Amina can be seen as critiquing the “orientalist stereotype” that “Arabs were culturally unprepared for, or incapable of democracy” (Peterson 2011:9). Rather, this new political scenario and state of liminality, was perceived by the activists, as a chance at translating words into deed; to not just *talk democracy*, but, also *practicing democracy*. “Make up your mind-choose well” was a related campaign that several of my research participants were involved in.⁶



Another avenue of mediation was involvement in the “Freedom bus”⁷ project which was interlinked with the previously mentioned “Make up your mind-choose well”:

The “freedom bus” toured the governorates in all of Egypt’s streets. (...) The bus set out to create general [political] awareness, laying out (...) essential principles of politics. What does it all mean? The freedom bus volunteers” chat with people (...) It toured more than ten governorates. The bus met up with locals before reaching the governorate, would announce its arrival at this and this governorate, and people would volunteer to tour with the bus. So the local people who know the place, introduce the place, and make contact and talk with the people in the street. (...) We helped select the topics that they would discuss in the streets. (Interview with Reem, April 15 2012).



Involvement in the “the freedom bus” project demonstrates how Reem and her fellow activists were aware of the importance of reaching out to audiences far beyond what Winegar (2012) considers the privileged iconic revolutionaries of Tahrir square. It also demonstrates how the activists employ “participatory and social media in conjunction with real-world organizing” (Wall and El Zahed 2011:1341). Indeed, a number of different media formats were employed in an attempt to reach larger audiences, and assist in the project of general political awareness of Egyptians. One of the most successful enterprises, is perhaps the following:

Revolution on a bus (...) We made a film (...) The one in the bus (...)
The democracy one, in the bus. (...) It originated from our group. The

group included directors, script writers, and one of the script writers (...) Tamer Mohsin (...) made the film, and the film received a very high percentage of viewings. And, many people wrote about it (...) We also created small animation films for awareness together with our partners. (Interview with Reem, April 15 2012).

This excerpt shows how female activists collaborated with script writers, in the creation of animated videos and short films in order to trigger political awareness amongst a larger public.⁸ The short film was popular on YouTube. (Thāwrt 25 yanāyir min dākḥil al-utūbīs 2011).⁹



The snippet is less than eight minutes long, yet succeeds in mediating a dense message. The story is set in a regular Cairo bus, and features a discussion of the divergent interests of the various passengers – and whether or not they should protest the bus price just having been arbitrarily raised by the young ticket collector. Interestingly, the passengers voice their viewpoints based on their differences in gender, age, political orientation and religiosity. The film has repeatedly struck me as highly professional and impressive. It gets across the parallel between what is going on in the bus and what is going on in Egypt – in a most salient manner despite its brevity.

In addition, a number of these women activists were involved in creating engagement and awareness about the content of the constitution:

We create awareness (...) there is for instance a project called, “Come, let’s write our constitution.” The initial idea is that we create a dialogue in the society so that people understand what is the constitution and what ought to be in it, and what we *want* in it. (Interview with Reem, April 15 2012).

Reem and her partners wished to instigate a dialogue about what Egyptians want their constitution to contain. It was a call to political involvement. This campaign was mediated online with its own Facebook page called: “Come, Let’s Write Our Constitution.”¹⁰



The title is in the aforementioned conversationalist and personalized Arabic, directed at “you,” for optimal personalized engagement.

In sum, Reem and her fellow activists continue to adapt and spread *the message*, using multiple platforms to mediate their lessons of political awareness. In the next and last section, I demonstrate how these activists also target direct politics through lobbying.

Lobbying for Gender Equality

In December of 2011, the pamphlet “Manual for Revising the Family Law For More Equality” went into print. It was the result of a collaboration

between my research participants and Coptic gender activists. “We were trying for the success of our work to be in this diversity,” says Amal.



The pamphlet was the first step, in lobbying to both al-Azhar and the constitutional committee for enabling a more just family law. I had the fortune of being able to attend (as an observer) the gender summit where this pamphlet was launched. I shall not here recap the entire summit but instead summarize my first impressions as expressed in my field diary:¹¹

The 2012 conference appears to be filled with hope and visions for the “new Egypt.”¹² There is a wish to (...) build awareness on gender issues. “In society, there is focus on democracy in politics. Now it is time for democracy in the family.” (...) This rhetorical question is asked repeatedly: “Can Egyptians only have democracy in terms of electoral rights and leave the social sphere out of it?” The answer: “– Impossible.” “there is a need for real change, changing axioms on gender, changing the on-the-ground perceptions of gender.” (Field notes Gender Summit 2012).

In sum, the great promise of liminality clung to the walls. On a pragmatic level, the conference was an attempt at bringing together gender activists

at different ends of the spectrum, in order to have more powerful leverage in further dialogues with both al-Azhar and the constitutional committee tasked with amending the Egyptian constitution.

We were able to encourage al-Azhar to produce something called the “al-Azhar declaration on women’s rights.” We made it for them, and we said we do not need to be in the picture, you can publish it with your name. And this declaration has been finalized (...) It is the result of one year of discussion.¹³ (Interview with Amal, June 12 2013).

All of these activities can be seen as not only as manifestations of *the message*, but also as an expression of what Amal calls “a holistic perspective on the revolution.” Amal explains that their starting point for the “Family Declaration” was that:

People are buried down in all sorts of problems be it economical or political (...) in bad social customs. They’re not able to live a good life (...) not even able to interact with one another in a good manner.

This is an example of how Amal and her fellow activists always have an eye to the micro level, and what they deem the “social side” to the revolution, that is the everyday lives and real life problems people face. This used to be the very trademark of IOL, and continues to shape the activities of the activists. Amal goes on to explain how the political turmoil may add layers of tensions to family life:

The political and economic stress puts things off balance, makes the balance overturn, she comes back from work, maybe her husband beats her, maybe her husband insults her. And therefore you do not solve the problem, if you focus only on the woman (...) You are empowering one individual, and the rest (of the family) you ignore (...) The man - in the end - he is an important individual, I mean, to ignore him is not right, you know. (...) So we made a “Family Declaration” (...) to ensure the inclusion of family matters in the amended constitution.

This is an illustration of the common view amongst these activists: that family problems at the micro level may reflect societal or political problems

at the macro level. The emphasis is on the family as an organic unit with internal dynamics:

We were attacked harshly by the women's association, because in feminist scholarship (...) talking about "the family," is considered a belittling of the woman, as if when you talk about "the family," you are *taking rights away* from the woman, for example, saying "live only for your family," (...) But, we were not talking about that. What we are saying is that women's rights, is something very important. However, seeing the family as whole, seeing the individuals together, and their interaction with one another, is very important and we should talk about that as well. This is not a belittling of women but a security for women. (Interview with Amal, June 12 2013).

Amal and her colleagues, eventually succeed in gaining support from secular activists for their "family perspective." Still, it was a difficult climate for discussing gender politics. Suzan Mubarak was the fore figure of most legal reforms that pushed for improving women's rights, and after the revolution, her name tarnished the work of gender activists (Sholkamy 2012). In reference to the latter, Amal concludes that their credibility is derived from lack of ties to the old regime,¹⁴ and the ability to collaborate with a variety of parties:

So, the secret to our success is that we stayed away from the (political) divides (...) We are trying all the time to bring these people together to discuss topics, about children, about family, how to make the Family Declaration for the constitution, and how to present this to the constitutional committee. (Interview with Amal, June 12 2013).

Here, Amal emphasises the importance of including a wide range of allies in putting forward a gender agenda, and trying to influence the constitutional committee. This last section, demonstrates that these women activists are not only trying to create political awareness amongst the general public but also by approaching bodies of political power. It also serves as a reminder of how far *the message* has spread.

Conclusion

This article has showcased how a group of Egyptian Islamist women activists engaged in a range of significant social, political, and media practices, before, during and after the ousting of Mubarak; as individuals, as journalists, as counsellors, as agenda setters and creators of media campaigns. By using an array of media and outreach approaches these activists are able to reach disparate audiences, breaching the digital divide. Moreover, their multifaceted approach to encouraging critical thinking and awareness, can be considered what Rose (1999) classifies as “practices of citizen formation.”

During the gender summit of 2012, Sawsan, an activist affiliated to Mada (and previous IOL employee), reformulates Samar Abduh’s metaphor about spreading the seeds of the message from memory:

Samar Abduh used to tell us something very beautiful. She used to say. “We are like the rose that when it dries, God wants us to (...) wants it to dry (...) scatter everywhere” (...) We are no longer united in one rose. No we are now spread out into many different places, so that the message can reach all of the places that we have gone to. (Interview with Sawsan, April 15 2012).

Sawsan’s description aptly describes how *the message* has travelled with each activist across the media platforms, organizations, and collaborative projects they have been a part of. Their modes of civic engagement continue to be shaped by the message, which advocates reform of the self, society, and politics. However, the activists also adapt to shifting political scenarios, by constructing a “new” form of revolutionary reporting, contributing to a wider understanding of what a “revolutionary act” can be considered, and by re-emphasising the relevance of *the message* in a new political landscape.

Indeed, the betwixt and between stage of liminality (Turner 1979) that Egypt was thrust into after the ousting of Mubarak, was particularly fertile soil for sowing and reaping the seeds of *the message*. It provided a unique opportunity for the activists to demonstrate the links between reforming the self, society and politics - and to reach out to a wider public with their

message. In such transitions, radical and creative ideas are accepted more readily. The state of liminality and social upheaval laid the groundwork for a renegotiation of gender norms, expanding women's modes of participation in the Egyptian revolution, and generated small family revolutions.

The overthrow of Mubarak was an optimal moment in history to invite audiences to join the activists in living *the message*, through the facilitation of informed and independent political choices. In this sense, the message has proven highly adaptable to shifting political scenarios. *The message* used to be the (IOL) organization. Now, *the message* lives on in each and every individual activist, and continues to spread across a multitude of media platforms, activist practices, and political transitions to come.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my research participants for sharing their time and perspectives with me. Many thanks to “the anthropological circle”: María A. Guzmán-Gallegos, Tone Sommerfelt, Cathrine Moe Thorleifsson, Nerina Weiss, and Hilde Maria Haualand for valuable feedback on the first raw draft of this article. A warm thanks to Sarah Jurkiewicz and Nele Lenze for speedily reading and providing excellent suggestions for improvement on an earlier draft of this article. I would also like to extend my gratitude to the anonymous reviewers who shared generously of their insight and provided most constructive feedback, and to Vit Sisler and Sahar Khamis for inviting me to contribute to this special issue of CyberOrient.

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Notes

¹ I conducted all the interviews in colloquial Egyptian Arabic. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and coded. The research participants have all consented to the interviews being cited in my scientific publications.

² Two quotes feature with the real identity of the persons interviewed. This is because these particular two quotes have been published elsewhere under the respondents' full names. Otherwise I employ pseudonyms in this text, due to the sensitivity of some of the topics discussed. This is considered a measure to minimise the risk of causing my research participants any harm.

³ These activists found employment with for instance the Freedom and Justice Newspaper, the Amr Khaled website, Reuters, and Abu Fotouh's presidential campaign.

⁴ This excerpt also sheds light on another aspect, namely how the "shutting off" of the Internet was a turning point in terms of mobilizing more demonstrators, of both genders, to pour into the streets of Egypt.

⁵ However, in the case of these particular activists, accessible language may also be due to influence from counseling lingo. See Abdel-Fadil (2012) for a discussion of this.

⁶ For more information see Make up your Mind! Choose well! 2011.

⁷ The "freedom bus" was one of a series of collaboration enabled by foreign funding. For more info see Freedom bus 2011.

⁸ I myself had viewed the "Revolution on a bus" a couple of times, before I was made aware of the involvement of my female research informants in its actual creation.

⁹ The film can be viewed on YouTube. See Thāwrt 25 yanāyir min dākhill al-utūbis 2011.

¹⁰ For more information see Come, Let's Write Our Constitution 2011, Dostorna 2011.

¹¹ For more information see Al-dalil al-irshādiy l-i'dād qanūn al-uthra aktar al-'adāla 2010.

¹² All words or sentences within quotation marks in the field diary excerpt are direct quotes.

¹³ For the al-Azhar declaration for women's rights, see Kubār al-'ulama' tuqr wathīqit al-azhar l-ḥuqūq al-mar'a b-ḥudūr al-qardāwī 2013.

¹⁴ Amal says this explicitly in the interview.