Contextualizing Internet Studies: Beyond the Online/Offline Divide

Jon Nordenson

University of Oslo

Abstract:

This essay discusses the issue of contextualization in studies of online platform usage and online material. It argues that a separation between online and offline cannot be sustained, as social media users relate to many different online and offline contexts simultaneously. Why protagonists make use of online platforms, which platforms they use, how they make use of them, who they seek to reach, and so on, is all dependent on the various geographical and social contexts within which they work. At the same time, these users are also part of and are influenced by different online contexts that may be based on topic, identity, or geography, and which may be local, national, regional or international. When we study online material – be it activism, language use, discourse, or something else - we must do so with all these relevant settings in mind. Throughout the essay, I seek to illustrate these complex relationships between different online and offline contexts through concrete examples from Egypt and Kuwait. I argue that the material shows that we cannot generalize and simply assume similar patterns of usage of online platforms producing similar outcomes across different contexts. Still, research so far has provided insights that are important both in their own right and, not least, as methodological and theoretical considerations for future studies, and I conclude by suggesting three principles that should guide our investigations of online material.

Introduction

It is clear, as argued by Shani Orgad, that the separation between online and offline cannot be sustained (Orgad, 2008, p. 37), as social media users relate to many different online and offline contexts simultaneously. This makes contextualization of studies of online material more difficult but also more important. However, even though the relationships between different contexts are complex, they are not

incomprehensible. While regional contextualisation carries merit, comparisons of online activism across national contexts in the Arab world is an equally important enterprise that serves to enrich and deepen our analysis.

In the aftermath of the 2010 and 2011 popular uprisings in the Middle East, the idea of "Facebook-revolutions" quickly gained popularity. Fortunately, this narrative has since been modified, although the use of social media routinely (and rightly) still is seen as an important factor in the events that unfolded. However, while social media may have been important for the uprisings in many different countries, they were certainly not equally important in all countries, and, not least, they were not important in the same manner in all countries. Why activists make use of social media, which platforms they use, how they make use of them, who they seek to reach; this is all dependent on the various geographical and social contexts within which they work. For instance, a particular platform may not be used in the same manner in Morocco, Egypt, Syria, and Kuwait. At the same time, users in these countries are also part of and are influenced by different online contexts that may be based on topic, identity, or geography, and which may be local, national, regional or international. When we study online material - be it activism, language use, discourse, or something else - we must do so with all these relevant settings in mind.

In the following,[1] I seek to illustrate these complex relationships between different online and offline contexts through concrete examples from Egypt and Kuwait. I argue that the material shows that we cannot generalize and simply assume similar patterns of usage of online platforms producing similar outcomes across different contexts. Still, research so far has provided insights that are important both in their own right and, not least, as methodological and theoretical considerations for future studies.

Most of the examples given are taken from my recent study of activists' use of online platforms in Egypt and Kuwait. More specifically, I looked at groups working against sexual harassment and violence in Egypt, and groups demanding democratic, constitutional reform

in Kuwait. Sexual harassment is a pervasive problem in Egypt that has long been covered in silence in public debate and ignored or even encouraged by security agencies, and the groups I studied fought to break this silence, force the state in to action and to change social norms. In Kuwait, the oppositional youth movements studied, centred in the tribal parts of the population, fought for radical, new solutions to the decades old problem of power sharing in the country, and demanded what they termed a constitutional emirate. All groups studied made extensive use of various online platforms, and while this usage at times was quite similar and/or sought to achieve similar goals, there were important differences related to the various contexts involved.

To begin with, there are of course important differences between the two countries in question that are bound to impact the work of activists. Egypt is a large country of 91 million people, whereas Kuwait is a tiny state of 3,7 million inhabitants, of which only about 1/3 are citizens. The majority of citizens in both countries are under 35 years of age.[2] Kuwait is seen as a more conservative country than Egypt, not least in terms of gender relations. Neither country is democratic, and old and new media is subject to control and repression in both countries. While Egypt struggle with poverty, Kuwait is an extremely wealthy oil-exporter, and GDP per capita is almost ten times higher than that of Egypt.[3] Kuwaiti citizens are generally wealthy, well-educated, and literate. However, the inhabitants that are not citizens - ex-pats and a large group of stateless inhabitants - do not enjoy the same privileges. Egypt, on the other hand, is a land of substantial socio-economic differences, where illiteracy is a problem. Yet, it is also a country with an increasingly well-educated young population, although youth unemployment in Egypt is widespread, and underemployment a problem for educated young people in both countries.

Not surprisingly, a larger part of the population uses the Internet in Kuwait than in Egypt. Numbers concerning usage and Internet access should always be used with caution, as they usually are based on self-reporting or assessments. Even so, they do provide useful information for our discussion. For 2014, the International Telecommunications Union stated that more than 40 percent of the Egyptian

people had access to the Internet, although not all make use of it. For Kuwait, the ITU states that about 78 percent of the population have access to and uses the Internet. Given the differences between citizens and non-citizens referred to above, the figure is probably higher among the former.4 In terms of usage, social media are widely popular in both countries. According to the Arab Social Media Report, almost a quarter of all Egyptians are on Facebook - and almost 75 percent of these Facebook-users are under 30 years of age, and about 64 percent are men. Twitter, on the other hand, is a small, elite phenomenon, used by just over 1 percent, although this still accounts for more than one million people. As with Facebook, about 65 percent of the users are male.[5] A 2013 FAFO survey of the greater Cairo area found that the number of people who use "blogs and other websites" was markedly higher among those identified in the survey as the "rich third," and among those with university education or higher (Kedebe, Kindt, and Høigilt, 2013). Accordingly, while Internet access is increasing, it seems the typical social media user in Egypt is young, relatively wealthy, well educated, and more often than not male. In Kuwait, The Arab social media report states that half the population is on Facebook, and a tenth on Twitter[6] - the highest number of per capita Twitter users in the world (Mocanu et al., 2013). According to Miller and Ko's analysis of its use in the 2012 elections, Twitter is "not an elite network", but engages the general public (Miller and Ko, 2015, p. 2948). As follows, the typical Kuwaiti social media user is young, and as a citizen, relatively wealthy and well educated, but she or he may more often than their Egyptian counterparts communicate with users that are older.

As in Egypt, about two thirds of the social media users in Kuwait are male.[7] As stated above, Kuwait is a conservative country, not least in terms of gender relations, and even liberal candidates for parliament separate men and women at campaign events. Women have long been un- or underrepresented in politics, and did not gain the right to vote until 2005. However, online platforms have helped Kuwaiti youth challenge traditional barriers (Wheeler, 2006), and both women and men took part online and offline in the campaign I studied, although men constituted a clear majority. Both women and men

took part in the campaign studied in Egypt as well, although women dominated in leadership positions in the groups. Although Egypt is a less conservative country than Kuwait, reaching out to women who had experienced harassment proved a challenge. While online platforms clearly were important, the groups recognized that many of those affected by the problem did not have access to the Internet, and so they also worked offline, and devised a solution by which SMS could be used to report harassment, as far more people have access to mobile phones. Again, while online platforms may help challenge traditional norms regarding gender relations, how and for whom they do so is dependent on the particular context in question.

The activist groups I studied predominantly made use of social media, although websites still retain a role for some groups, as do blogs. Which social media platform they preferred, however, differed between the two countries. While all Egyptian groups made use of both Twitter and Facebook, the Kuwaiti groups were only active on Twitter, even though Facebook has more users and provide features that would have been beneficial for the groups. There were two, related reasons for this: first, Facebook is seen primary as a private platform in Kuwait. Secondly, as we have seen, Twitter has a unique standing in the country, not least as a platform for political debate, in which established politicians and even members of the royal family take part. The Kuwaiti groups' strategy to achieve their goals was to make their views and arguments known, and to mobilize people in the streets. Quite clearly, in order to reach the Kuwaiti political public that they sought, Twitter would be their best option online. The situation was different in Egypt, where Facebook was well established as a platform for activism, having been introduced as such by the April 6 movement in 2008 (Lim, 2012, p. 239), although we should not underestimate the importance of Twitter. A potential problem, of course, is that much research on online activism has been focused on Egypt, and so the view of Facebook as an important platform in this regard has perhaps been given a more general validity than what is actually the case. Similarly, while blogs already have been declared dead, they were very much alive in my material. Platform selection is not dependent on technical possibilities and novelty alone; it is highly dependent on the relevant contexts.

New and old media

Sexual harassment is a problem Egyptian women face every day; in schools, on the streets, at work, and other places.[8] Even so, it was seldom discussed publicly. Women were often blamed, and admitting to being harassed was seen as shameful. The state at times denied the problem, at times used harassment and violence against women to suppress opposition, or sought to appropriate the problem to serve their own needs (Amar, 2011). Few complaints of harassment were registered with the police, which itself often was part of the problem. In other words, the groups studied fought an uphill battle. They wanted to reach out to those who experienced harassment, to tell them that it was not their fault and they should not be ashamed. They wanted to document the extent of the problem and expose it to the Egyptian public. They wanted to break the silence surrounding the issue, to articulate it as a problem, to change norms in society and to pressure the unwilling state into action.

In their remarkably successful efforts to achieve these goals, the use of online platforms was crucial for the groups. In fact, I argue that the main benefit activists gain from the use of online platforms, both in Egypt and Kuwait, is the counter publicness they provide, which allows subaltern groups to find together, document their problem and articulate their concerns and demands, and raise these to the public at large. However, given the figures on Internet access and usage in Egypt referred to above, other channels would be necessary to reach the wider public. This raises the question of the relationship between social media and the traditional media, which, in turn, tells us a lot about the importance of contextualization.

In general, many researchers have argued that social media are a positive contribution to the established media scenes in the Middle East in terms accessing, sharing and producing news, ideas and information. As argued by Elizabeth Iskander: "New media enable individuals to bypass the traditional gatekeepers to, and sources of, information" (Iskander, 2011, p. 1227). Social media platforms make it easy for users to rapidly and cheaply share pictures, videos and text, which in turn enable them to share information, break news stories,

and expose wrongdoings ignored by traditional media outlets. This is often referred to as "citizen journalism", and has been seen as particularly important in autocratic countries in which the media otherwise often are subject to censorship and state control: no longer would it be possible to suppress the people without the world knowing.

This does not mean that social media replace traditional media, or that new and old media work independently of each other. Marwan Kraidy has suggested the term "hypermedia space" to denote "a broadly defined symbolic field created by interactions between multiple media, from micro-blogging to region-wide satellite broadcasting" (Kraidy, 2007, p. 140). This space has many points of access, is not easily subject to social or political control, and has a non-hierarchical nature that invites "a rethinking of Arab information dynamics" (Kraidy, 2007, p. 140) - many actors and different media are involved in creating, spreading and interpreting news stories. That different media and actors work together became extremely clear during the Arab uprisings of 2010 and 2011, both in terms of news production as well as mobilization. As argued by Kristina Riegert, the Arab spring demonstrated how "the interaction between mobile telephones, Internet, and pan-Arab satellite television circulated ideas found in social media to much wider national and international audiences" (Riegert, 2015, p. 458). In my material, I found that old and new media affected each other both in Egypt and Kuwait, but they did so differently in the two countries. Again, this was related to the different offline contexts, including the different media landscapes.

After decades of tight state control, the Egyptian media landscape opened up from the early 1990s, as the country introduced the first Arab satellite channel. In 2000, Egypt allowed for private satellite channels, and soon also private, independent newspapers (Faris, 2013; Sakr, 2012). At around the same time, Internet was becoming increasingly popular, although it remained a privilege of the relatively wealthy and well educated. Even so, from the early 2000s, Egypt witnessed a media liberalization coupled with the emergence of a vibrant blogosphere and an outspoken oppositional activist scene, and this parallel development was far from accidental. Rather, many argue that activists and journalists affected each other and sometimes

worked together (Sakr, 2012). While Internet access and usage was and is limited, both journalists and activists typically fall within those societal groups that do make use of the net. The interplay between journalists and activists helped expose a number of scandals on part of the regime, such as the famous case of the torture of a minibus driver in the hands of the police, which even led to the conviction of the police officers involved (Isherwood, 2008). Also international stations referred to bloggers and online sources, and during the 2011 revolution, al-Jazeera and other networks made wide use of content produced by protesters, such as videos showing the police attacking unarmed protesters, putting pressure on world leaders to react.

Returning to the activist groups I have studied in Egypt, these had an ambivalent relationship with traditional media. On the one hand, they wanted to reach out to the Egyptian people with their views and arguments, and they recognized the importance of TV and news-papers in doing so. On the other hand, they often criticized media outlets for not taking harassment seriously as a problem, or not re-specting the privacy of those who were harassed. They sought to correct this, even inviting journalists to meetings and seminars, and by and large they succeeded: sexual harassment is generally treated as a problem in Egyptian media. Online platforms were important for the groups to reach the media: they documented the problem though photos, videos, and testimonies which were easily accessible, they documented their work demonstrating their credibility, and they continuously presented their arguments and their demands. For any journalist concerned with the issue, it would be natural to contact the groups. However, personal offline contacts were also important, and many of the activist involved had experience from the period of coop-eration referred to above - the particular Egyptian historical context was of importance.

The interplay between different media, the hypermedia space referred to by Kraidy, was evident in the work of the groups I studied. Dif-ferent media and different actors could create and affect a news story as it developed, and at times, activists or ordinary people could set the agenda or determine how issues were framed even on national TV. For instance, in one famous incident, harassment of a female

student in Cairo was filmed using a cellphone, the footage spread online, and it was picked up by TV stations. A representative of the university was interviewed on air, blaming the student herself. The activist groups reacted, condemning these statements online and on TV, and a TV-channel confronted the university representative, who soon retracted his comments.[9]

However, following the 2013 military coup in Egypt, things have changed. While all the post-2011 regimes have taken steps to control the media, dissenting voices in newspapers and on TV have almost disappeared over the last three years. Of course, there are still social media. Yet, while it is true that it is difficult to control social media, authoritarian regimes can make the potential price for speaking one's mind online so high that most people chose not to, and tens of thousands of activists and intellectuals have been arrested in Egypt. Then, one might ask, can't social media users expose their regime's repression to the outside world? Yes, but here we face a central problem with the idea that citizen journalism will stop regime violence: documentation in itself is not enough. Change depends on people in power reacting to the images, that is "doing something" about the injustice and violence. Repression in Egypt is well known and well documented, but since 2013, no one with the ability to do so has interfered.

Turning to Kuwait, we see a different media landscape. Following a liberalization of the press law in 2006, the number of Arabic daily newspapers rose to 15 - hardly financially viable in a country of little more than a million citizens. Many argue that these newspapers are not intended to make money, but to rather to serve the interests of their owners. These owners generally belong to the wealthy business elite or the royal family who, naturally, support the ruling regime. As pointed out by Kjetil Selvik, the "clear majority of newspapers that emerged post 2006 are pro-government in orientation" (Selvik, 2011, p. 493).

As a consequence, the Kuwaiti opposition, including the activist groups I have studied, do not trust the traditional media in the country, referring to it simply as the "corrupt media" which serves the regime. Yet, as we have seen above, they did want to reach out to the

Kuwaiti public. Here, we must remind ourselves of the contextual differences between Egypt and Kuwait discussed earlier. Whereas Egypt is a country of 91 million people with limited Internet access and large socio-economic differences, Kuwait, is a tiny country of just over a million citizens, most of which have access to the Internet. The groups I studied addressed the Kuwaiti public directly through social media, and in particular Twitter, which as we have seen has a special standing in the country. And they were, at least for some time, extremely successful- at one point, they mobilized more than 100 000 people, almost 10 percent of the citizens, to a demonstration (Tétreault, 2012). Their relationship with the traditional media was different than among activists in Egypt, and again, we do not find support for sweeping conclusions on the effects of new media that transcends offline context.

This does not mean that the Kuwaiti activists ignored or were ignored by the traditional media - they often sought to correct what they deemed unfair or incorrect stories published. Moreover, old and new media interact also in Kuwait. There is a show in Kuwaiti TV dedicated to what is happening on Twitter, and statements made in newspapers were routinely discussed in social media and vice versa. However, for the oppositional activists, social media long proved sufficient to further their cause. That was, until the government decided that they've had enough, and began to repress the opposition: riot police violently attacked demonstrations, and oppositional social media users were arrested for what they wrote online. Again, citizen journalism seemed to offer a solution, and the groups documented the violence and appealed to Kuwaitis to react, but to no avail. They then addressed international media, as well as rights organizations. However, the Kuwaiti group organizing the protest, despite having 100 000 followers and posting dramatic footage, did not succeed in gaining much international attention, and no one interfered to stop the regime's repression.

So we have seen two major problems concerning citizen journalism. First, it requires someone to react, but this does not always happen. Second: not all stories, and not all countries, are seen as interesting

Jon Nordenson

124

by media outlets. Moreover, international news media have their own agendas which may affect coverage: for instance, al-Jazeera has been accused of largely ignoring the uprising in Bahrain due to the political considerations of its owners, in spite of Bahraini activists publishing footage of government violence on social media. So traditional media still hold much power in setting the agenda, not least in autocratic countries. While the hypermedia space Kraidy refers to clearly is difficult to control fully, authoritarian regimes can still censor traditional media and scare many people from being critical in social media - repression may have changed or become more difficult, but it is still far from impossible. And activists cannot depend on coverage from international media or on the outside world to react. This is not to say that social media are unimportant, it is to stress the importance of local, offline context with regards to the impact of social media.

Norms and practices

While following the groups in Kuwait, I came across numerous political debates that took place on Twitter in 2012, started by oppositional activists and organized around specific hashtags stating the subject of discussion. Surprisingly, most tweets were written not in Kuwaiti Arabic, but in Standard Arabic. This was not supposed to happen. The Arabic language has two varieties, Standard Arabic, often referred to as the "high" variety, and local dialects, often referred to as the "low" variety, and which are different from country to country. Standard Arabic has traditionally been used and seen as appropriate for writing, as well as formal speech, whereas local dialects have been reserved for informal, everyday speech.

It has been widely argued, however, that computer mediated communication, not least on social media, is shattering this separation and favour local dialects as a written variety- people write in local dialects online, in part as social media facilitates what Allman terms "speech like" communication (Allmann, 2009). This is seen as worrying by some proponents of Standard Arabic, and as contributing to obscuring the difference between Standard Arabic and local dialects. Either way, we would expect the Kuwaiti activists on Twitter to use

Jon Nordenson

the Kuwaiti dialect, but they did not. This was particularly surprising given that given that a few years earlier, I had studied a Kuwaiti activist movement active in 2006 known as the Orange movement, which discussed politics in the comments fields of blogs. And they actually wrote in Kuwaiti Arabic. This called for closer examination.

I conducted a study of the language used in the two campaigns,[10] and my findings were quite clear: in 2006, the activists favoured Kuwaiti Arabic, in 2012 they favoured Standard Arabic. I also included a random sample of Twitter usage in the country - in this,both varieties were employed equally. Moreover, Arabizi, that is, the practice of writing Arabic with Latin letters, was hardly employed at all, even though this has been declared a "funky language for teenzz to use" online (Palfreyman and Khalil, 2003).The question then, is how can we explain the apparent move from Kuwaiti Arabic to Standard Arabic online among activists in the country? I argue we find the explanation in the differences in the spaces in which the debates took place, and by extension, in the intended and expected audiences.

In 2006, 26 percent of Kuwaitis used the Internet, the majority of which were young people. All participants in the discussions on the blogs were visible on the site used, so they could also see who they talked to - and most of all, the activists talked to each other. In contrast, in 2012, most Kuwaitis were online, and Twitter had gained a special standing as a platform for debate engaging Kuwaitis from all parts of society.The debates generated thousands of tweets, and those participating could not know who everyone else taking part were. But in Kuwait, this means you could be writing to politicians, members of the royal family, or even the Prime Minister.

So the intended, expected and possible audiences for the activists in 2006 and 2012 were very different, and as Alan Bell argued in his influential 1984 work: speakers design their style for their audiences (Bell, 1984). The difference in language use in 2006 and in 2012 was no coincidence. The participants made choices in accordance with setting and audience: Kuwaiti dialect was considered appropriate when talking to fellow activists, and standard Arabic was chosen when addressing a large, unknown and possibly very influential audi-

ence. Clearly, language use online is far from accidental, and it is not dictated by the medium used: it is the result of deliberate choices.

Thus, we cannot speak of a "netspeak" that ascribe common features to the language used on online platforms,[11] because "online", "social media", or even a particular platform is not one thing, one context, or one set of practices, but rather a myriad of publics, audiences, and conversations. In Kuwait, different practices were established for different online publics, which in turn may be different in other countries: The Egyptian activists I have studied, for instance, predominantly wrote in Egyptian Arabic also when discussing politics on Twitter. Clearly, online platforms make it possible for (the mostly) young social media users to challenge existing norms, for instance concerning the written language, but quite clearly, we cannot assume that this will always happen. And we must remember, the fact that social media users can challenge traditional norms and conventions does not mean that these disappear. For instance: while social media may help young Kuwaitis to bypass gender segregation, these young Internet users still face society's, and perhaps their parents' expectations offline - they have to deal with conflicting norms, values and influences. So what Herrera and Sakr calls "the wired generation" negotiates "a complex space that is simultaneously public and private, free and restrictive, liberating and repressive" (Herrera and Sakr, 2014, p. 7). This, of course, has wide reaching implications that go beyond the study of online material and deserve (and receive) academic attention from various disciplines. For this discussion, it once again reminds us of the many different contexts we must consider when studying online material, and of the dangers of focusing on a strict and artificial online/offline separation as defining criteria in terms of norms and practices.

Social media and other online platforms provide a wide range of opportunities, the direction and content of which is determined by the users. But whatever they do, they are still affected by both their online and offline contexts. There is no support for any technological determinism on part of social media: we cannot assume how online platforms are used and which effects this usage causes across different contexts. But we can, I argue, conclude with the following:

There is no sharp distinction between online and offline, influence moves both ways.

As follows, the online is not one thing, and we should not assume identical patterns of usage, or that social media necessarily lead to particular results across different offline and online contexts.

Clearly, when researching various aspects of the use of social media, we must ground our analysis of the material in the various online and offline contexts within which it was produced, shared and interpreted.

Finally, we should keep in mind that studies of the relationships between different contexts and Internet users in the Middle East will not only tell us much about the use and importance of online platforms, but they will also tell us much about the norms, values and identities of young citizens in these countries.

References

Allmann, K. (2009). Arabic Language Use Online: Social, Political, and Technological Dimensions of Multilingual Internet Communication. *The Monitor* (Winter 2009), 61-76.

Amar, P. (2011). Turning the gendered politics of the security state inside out? Charging the police with sexual harassment in Egypt. *International Feminist Journal of Politics,* 13(3), 299-328.

Bell, A. (1984). Language style as audience design. *Language in society*, 13(02), 145-204.

Faris, D. M. (2013). *Dissent and revolution in a digital age: Social media, blogging and activism in Egypt.* New York: IB Tauris.

Herrera, L., & Sakr, R. (2014). Introduction: Wired and revolutionary in the Middle East and North Africa. In L. Herrera & R. Sakr (Eds.), *Wired Citizenship: Youth Learning and Activism in the Middle East* (pp. 1-17). New York & London: Routledge.

Isherwood, T. (2008). A new direction or more of the same? Political blogging in Egypt. *Arab Media & Society*, 6, 1-17.

Iskander, E. (2011). Connecting the national and the virtual: can Facebook activism remain relevant after Egypt's January 25 uprising? *International Journal of Communication*, 5, 1225-1237.

Kedebe, T. A., Kindt, K. T., & Høigilt, J. (2013). Language Change in Egypt: Social and Cultural Indicators Survey A Tabulation Report *Fafo-report* (pp. 144). Oslo: Fafo.

Kraidy, M. M. (2007). Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and the changing Arab information order. *International Journal of Communication*, 1, 139-156.

Lim, M. (2012). Clicks, cabs, and coffee houses: Social media and oppositional movements in Egypt, 2004-2011. *Journal of Communication*, 62(2), 231-248.

Miller, N. W., & Ko, R. S. (2015). Studying Political Microblogging: Parliamentary Candidates on Twitter During the February 2012 Election in Kuwait. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 2933-2953.

Mocanu, D., Baronchelli, A., Perra, N., Gonçalves, B., Zhang, Q., & Vespignani, A. (2013). The Twitter of Babel: Mapping world languages through microblogging platforms. *PloS one*, 8(4), e61981.

Orgad, S. (2008). How Can Researchers Make Sense of the Issues Involved in Collecting and Interpreting Online and Offline Data. In A. N. Markham & N. K. Baym (Eds.), *Internet Inquiry conversations about method* (pp. 33 - 53). Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Palfreyman, D., & Khalil, M. (2003). " A Funky Language for Teenz to Use:" Representing Gulf Arabic in Instant Messaging. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 9(1).

Riegert, K. (2015). Understanding Popular Arab Bloggers: From Public Spheres to Cultural Citizens. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 458-477.

Sakr, N. (2012). Social media, television talk shows, and political change in Egypt. *Television & New Media*, 14(4), 322-337.

Selvik, K. (2011). Elite rivalry in a semi-democracy: The Kuwaiti Press scene. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 47(3), 477-496.

Tétreault, M. A. (2012). Looking for Revolution in Kuwait. *Middle East Report Online.*

Wheeler, D. L. (2006). *The Internet in the Middle East Global Expectations and Local Imaginations in Kuwait.* New York: State University of New York Press.

Notes

[1] I would like to thank Mona Abdel-Fadil for great comments and feedback on this text. The essay is based on the author's trial lecture entitled "Language, media and culture in Egypt vs Kuwait: how do they affect the social media scenes", given at the University of Oslo, June 13 2016. Most examples are taken from the author's PhD-project, "Online activism in Egypt and Kuwait: counterpublicness and democratization in authoritarian contexts", forthcoming on I. B. Tauris.

[2] "Egypt" and "Kuwait," The World Bank Open Data, accessed August 23 2016, http://data.worldbank.org/. See also "About Egypt," The United Nations Development Programme, http://www.eg.undp.org/content/egypt/en/home/countryinfo.html, and "Kuwait,"The CIA World Factbook, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ku.html, both accessed August 23 2016.

[3] "GDP per capita (current US$)," The World Bank Open Data, accessed August 23 2016, http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD.

[4] "Percentage of individuals using the Internet" and Core indicators of access to and use of ICT by households and individuals", The International Telecommunications Union, accessed August 23 2016, http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx.

[5] Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government, "Arab Social Media Report (6th edition)," June 2014, accessed August 23 2016, http://www.arabsocialmediareport.com/UserManagement/PDF/ASMR6_En_Final.pdf.

[6] Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government, "Arab Social Media Report (6th edition).

[7] Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government, "Arab Social Media Report (6th edition).

[8] According to a 2013 UN Women study, 99,3 percent of Egyptian women state that they have experienced sexual harassment: United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) and The National Council for Women (NCW), "Study on Ways and Methods to Eliminate Sexual Harassment in Egypt (2013)." Accessed August 23 2016, http://web.law.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/microsites/gender-sexuality/un_womensexual-harassment-study-egypt-final-en.pdf.

[9] "Viral Video of Harassed Blonde Egypt Woman Sparks Backlash,"Al-Arabiya News, March 19, 2014, Accessed August 24 2016, http://english. alarabiya.net/en/variety/2014/03/19/-Viral-video-of-harassed-blonde-Egypt-women-sparks-backlash.html.

[10] The study is entitled "The language of online activism."

[11] For brief introduction to this and similar terms and how problematic they are, see Jannis Androutsopoulos, "Introduction: sociolinguistics and computer-mediated communication," *Journal of sociolinguistics* 10(4) (2006): 419-438.