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Middle Eastern Women's 'Glocal': Journeying between the Online and Public Spheres

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Abstract:

Despite the fact that the Arab Spring did not necessarily materialize with the political effects anticipated by some of its activists, it has brought into the spotlight the significance of the role of women in direct connection to the online space. In this respect, the article addresses the online world as Middle Eastern women subcultural capital in their traversal to the public sphere, which is otherwise rigorously enforced particularly on women. The hybridity of the private and the public exemplified in the online world in effect plays a pivotal role in rendering the visibility of Middle Eastern women in the political public sphere possible, where new media provides an effective vehicle for those women to establish social and political networks and organizations. Though the goals for those women activists might vary based on the nature of their countries, they have shown to have aptly journeyed between the online and public spheres in order to voice their glocal experiences.

Keywords:

Muslim women, gender, public sphere, Arab Spring

Introduction

Six years have passed since the occurrence of the Arab Spring. Perhaps the Arab Spring did not materialize with political effects anticipated by some of its activists, but it has brought into the global attention the local activism of Middle Eastern women who have utilized the online world as their subcultural capital in their traversal to the public sphere which is otherwise rigorously enforced particularly on women. The proposed article has thus adopted Wellman and Hampton's deployment of the term 'glocalization' which refers to the combination of global and local connectivity aided by new media technology (Hampton 2001:32).¹ In his dissertation, Hampton has posited

that new media technology could act as a facilitator of connecting individuals who are at a distance with those who are local (Hampton 2001:174). Within the proposed study, the term 'glocal' will be operationally used to refer to the way the local activism and experiences of Middle Eastern women have become globally acknowledged facilitated by new media technology. The online sphere has acted in this sense as a gateway through which Middle Eastern women could voice their rights as 'citizens' in the public sphere unhampered by the constraints of norms and traditions of the Arabo-Islamic region where they belong.

The study thus contributes to the literature examining the connectivity between everyday life and social structure, focusing on social spaces and knowledge production with the aim of challenging the dichotomized approaches to the private/public particularly in Middle Eastern societies. The article posits that the visibility of such cohort has been significantly influenced by the access of this generation of women to novel sources of knowledge including their engagement with new media technologies and communicative practices which have increased the prospects of women's visibility in the political public sphere. The public surfacing of Middle Eastern women in an increasingly complex society enfolds a certain accumulative effect (Raudvere 2002:83-85). Gradually, groups that were not long ago marginalized are now integrated in the mainstream aided by new media technology which they can access without much control from state authorities or from male family members. Such new visibility counters the classical dichotomy of public-private and man-woman established in many secularization-modernization theories.

Within the study, the Arab Spring functions as the temporal experience contextualizing the claiming of public space by Middle Eastern women aided by new media technology. To this end, the study will delineate the development of online activism of the women under study as it goes through the three stages of *mobilization*, *documentation* and *sharing* and *cultural dissemination* as concurrent with the development of the Arab Spring itself. Mobilization in this sense refers to the initial stages of the Arab uprisings where these Middle Eastern women call on other people to join in the protests, to be followed by the process of documentation of events, experiences and stances to be shared

by others. Finally comes the stage of cultural dissemination which is operationally defined as the spreading of culture of active citizenry whether on local or global levels in which citizens move from criticizing to helping. While the structure of the article primarily follows the three afore-mentioned stages of development of online activism, it has taken into account the differences that might exist among Middle Eastern societies as regards to women's access to the public space. The article has thus opted for the cases of Tunisia, both Yemen and Egypt, and Saudi Arabia as exhibiting three levels of access ranging from relatively more open, open, to closed societies, respectively.

As the article draws on a critical analysis of the Habermasian notion of the public sphere, the first part of the article will be devoted to a brief introduction of the theory and its critique and the way it is applied in Arabo-Islamic contexts, followed by a delineation of the online activism of Middle Eastern women across the stages of mobilization, documentation and sharing, and cultural dissemination. The article is based on content analysis and discourse analysis of the views, experiences and challenges encountered by the women under study as demonstrated in new media utilities including Facebook, Twitter, weblogs, and Youtube, in order to attain an in-depth understanding of the visibility of Middle Eastern women under study within a dynamic political situation.

The public sphere

The notion of public sphere has been launched by Jürgen Habermas to describe the space intersecting between the political and social life positioned outside the state apparatus without being identical to civil society, where private citizens get engaged in critical public debates which are conducive to forming public opinion and thus impact the formal state apparatus (Postone 1992:164). The public sphere constitutes the domain upon which the pivotal questions of democracy are based on both the conceptual and institutional levels (Gole 2003:27). In this context, the public sphere denotes the domain of social life where issues of common concern could be both unrestrainedly and overtly addressed by citizens, molding and affecting public opinion (Thomas 2004:230). The notion of the public has developed

dialectically with that of the private sphere (Mitchell 2003:132) where the lines defining the public space of the city could be the lines between public and private properties (Madanipour 2003:217). In his seminal work *Keywords*, Raymond Williams has delineated the notion of the public in Anglo-American ideas and practices (Williams 1983). He has stated that between the seventeenth and nineteenth century, the private surfaced as a domain of generalized privilege, seclusion, and shelter from others, liberated from public inspection.

The Habermasian public sphere should not be deemed however as a universally accessible public space (Eley 1992:36). The traversal of boundaries between the private and public spheres has been a controversial topic particularly within women's movement and feminist studies, where debates have been carried out about depicting the private as the political and generating alternative counter public spheres, or the possible disintegration of the private sphere under the impact of mass media and the ensuing need to safeguard the private sphere (Wischermann 2004:184-185).

Though such public-private dichotomy was applied universally, it lay a great focus on Arabo-Islamic cultures (al-Guindy 2007:172). The Arabo-Islamic region is generally characterized by a space-based patriarchy where men are depicted as located in the public space, and women in the private space (Sadiqi 2011:3). In spite of the varying levels of gender differentiation and segregation from one society to another within the Arabo-Islamic region, its public generally emblemizes less an arena of deliberation than submission to authority, as part of a project geared toward fostering and securing a uniform model of moral behavior (Hirschkind 2006:105).

Women's negotiation of boundaries in Middle Eastern societies

Along time, privacy and publicity have become however negotiated within the changing political, economic and cultural relations between state and society in such regions (Shami 2009:19). That particularly applies to women where the first half of the twentieth century witnessed new forms of women's participation in the public life by means of unveiling, education,

employment and political participation (Lapidus 2011:861-862). State formation, economic development and urbanization have been conducive to incorporating women into the workforce. As a result of educational reforms during the nineteenth century, women started to speak for themselves and to communicate platforms that would voice their needs and desires.

Conspicuously, media has played a substantial role in providing a gateway to women's entry to the public sphere. The mass media also disseminated new values and tastes and more importantly the cognizance of Western lifestyles (Lapidus 2011:861). As early as 1891, Fatma Aliye Hanem made use of the press in the Ottoman Empire by publishing a book on women to promote her ideas on women as wives, mothers, and Muslims (Lapidus 2011:857). Women's newspapers increasingly emerged in Egypt, Iran, Turkey and Syria, and women's educational and charitable organizations were set in association with publications.

While some women were satisfied with the idealized roles as wives and mothers, others wanted to participate in the politics of independent nations. Women's social activism in the Middle East region was thus ensued by political involvement (Lapidus 2011:858-860). Women have played important roles in politics as in the revolutionary struggles of the Palestinian movement, Iran and Algeria. Those movements have mobilized women to organize, demonstrate, make speeches, and in some cases to fight.

Though the modern national state endeavored to re-demarcate family structure and women's roles, the traditional position of women stood as an impediment to further change (Lapidus 2011:860-862). Among the post profound impediments to change were the deeply entrenched cultural beliefs of both men and women. Low educational attainment combined with family and social beliefs lowered the integration of women into the workforce as well as their political participation. The post-revolutionary period in a number of Islamic countries thus demonstrated a reaction and a withdrawal of women from active political participation.

The massive efforts to curb the activities of women have in fact promoted the most vibrant women's reaction in Middle Eastern societies (Lapidus 2011:866). In Iran, for instance, Educated Iranian women who were driven back in the Khomeni program have established *Zanan*, a monthly women's magazine. They have called for the reinterpretation of the Qur'an and questioned male critical interpretations.

With the advent of new media technology, the online space has helped women activists propose redefinitions of political identities, actions, and locales, which could open another sphere to the plurality of public spheres that feminists have advocated for (Kenway and Nixon 1999:465). New media has then been deemed as a vehicle toward exploring concepts of freedom, empowerment and the transcendence of physical suppression (Haraway 1985). Feminists such as Haraway have further entertained the idea of how hyperreality could allow imagining 'a post-gender world' (Haraway 1985:66). By the turn of the millennium, the idealistic views of the first generation of digital democracy were replaced by a more precise picture of the online space as *not* THE solution to the political crisis but a tool which if properly utilized by social movements and associated by public policies could eventually greatly impact the functioning of political systems (Vedel 2003:213-214).

Middle Eastern women's online activism within the Arab Spring

Recently, the Arab Spring has remarkably witnessed the leadership and activism of Middle Eastern women who have played pivotal inspirational roles and initiated forms of online activism owing to their passion for change and their good command of new communication tools (Radsch 2013:881). The Arab Spring itself was hailed as a 'Facebook revolution' where social media has played a pivotal role in establishing communication networks during the different phases of the uprisings. New forms of media, notably online space, has become pivotal in imparting new spaces for varied and significant views of contemporary life in the region and proposing various role models from across the gamut of political, social, economic and religious experiences. As Bayat has rightly posited, the idea of 'change'

in Middle Eastern societies used to be examined with a largely Western Orientalist outlook that could date back to the eighteenth century, if not before (Bayat 2013:10-11). In this sense, Middle Eastern societies which are essentially equated with the religion of Islam were depicted as locales of historical continuity rather than historical change, where if change were to happen, though uncommonly, it would take place via military, elites, external forces, but not through the people. The Arab Spring has obviously quivered the underpinnings of such perspectives, where distinct and novel forms of agency and activism have surfaced in the Middle East that do not receive sufficient attention since they do not fit into the dominant categories and prevailing imaginations.

Middle Eastern women who have emblemized an integral part of such outlook have benefited from that political momentum to call for their rights as citizens. As delineated in the case studies presented in this article, Middle-Eastern women's online activism has acted as a subcultural milieu facilitating their journeying between the private and the public, the social and the political, the local and the global. Those women's sense of citizenship has constituted the primary principle of their identity, thereby transcending the different identities premised on gender, religion and class as superseded by the unifying experience of the Arab Spring (see Asad 2003). Women of different ideologies hand in hand with men have thus organized demonstrations, mobilized like-minded individuals or disseminated updates via social media (Gray 2015:182). Those women have played a substantial role in laying the foundation for political change and social reform (Khamis 2010). The synergy between the social and the political could be evidenced from the discourse of Middle Eastern women who seem to link between calling for action against despotic regimes and urging their struggling Arab sisters to attain their rights in a male-domineered society.

The cohort investigated in the present study is made up of Middle Eastern women who seem to have experienced some form of transformation of boundaries between the private and public spheres facilitated by new media (Roberts 2014:94). The novel forms of online communication in this sense do not solely work on opening the 'oligarchic' public sphere to

a periphery of novel actors, but more importantly pluralize and distribute, in various ways, forms of public speech by using languages and occupying spaces which traditional politics may quite often not take notice of (Cardon 2012:70). The transformation voiced via online space has gone through the three stages of ‘mobilization’, ‘documentation and sharing’ and finally ‘cultural dissemination’ as concurrent with the development of the Arab Spring itself.

Online space as a mobilizing tool

Some years before the Arab Spring, Arab women have deployed the online space as a vehicle to call for action against some despotic Arab regimes. As early as 2007, the Yemeni Tawakol Karman, acclaimed as the Mother of the Arab Spring has published a valiant article in the *al-Thawri* newspaper and the *Mareb* Press website raising the alarm against the danger facing the state of Yemen and outlining the choice between (deposed) President Ali Abdallah Saleh and his regime on one side, and opposition parties and trends on the other.² Karman has further called for a ‘complete peaceful uprising’ (*intifāda silmiyya kāmila*) with the objective of ‘overthrowing the corrupt regime’ ‘*isqāt al-nizām al-fāsid*’ The numerous comments made in response to this article could illustrate the powerful impact of Karman’s words on its readers; supportive reactions such as ‘a woman worth thousand moustaches (i.e. men)’ (*imra’a bi-’alf shanab*), ‘should be done’ (*al-mathlub-fi’lahu*) or ‘with you till the end’ (*ma’ik hatta al-nihāya*), to mention but a few.

At the outset of the Arab Spring, Middle Eastern women have utilized the online space to participate in the protests as was the case with the viral vlog posted by the young Egyptian Asmaa Mahfouz before 25 January in which she posted that, ‘I, a girl, am going down to Tahrir Square and will stand by myself and hold up a banner so that people may have some honor.’³ As mentioned elsewhere, being a woman did not seem to act as an obstacle for Mahfouz to participate in the protests.⁴ On the contrary, her womanhood was aptly used as a tool to push men into participating in 25 January protests, relying on the quality of *nakhwa* (manliness towards women)

as a commended quality among Arab and Muslim men. She said, 'Any man who considers himself as such should join me in Tahrir protests. Any man who says women should not go to the protests because they usually get beaten, let him have some honor and manhood and come with me on January 25th.' Moreover, Mahfouz has urged people to deploy new media tools as mobile phone short messages and other Internet communication facilities to make others aware of the protests. Her viral video has not been only popularly credited to have helped inspire thousands of Egyptians to participate in the 25 January protests, but has been further acclaimed as to trigger the Egyptian government's decision to block Internet facilities (Hosni 2016). An exaggeration as it might be, it could demonstrate the strong impact of cyberspace as a powerful tool for social movements toward democratic governance (Wellman 2002).

Online space as a tool for documentation and sharing

In addition to 'mobilization', Middle Eastern women have used the on-line space as a vehicle for documenting ongoing events and disseminating information about the uprisings at its outset. In Tunisia, street demonstrations were uploaded to well-known opposition sites and blogs thanks to the likes of the online activist Tunisian blogger Lina Ben Mhenni via her ATunisianGirl.blogspot.com. Ben Mhenni is believed to be the only blogger available in Regueb and Kasserine when security forces massacred people there at the outset of the Arab Spring. In this respect, the cherished pictures and accounts of deaths and injuries from Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine posted by Ben Mhenni acted as the catalysts that have galvanized more Tunisians out onto the streets in protest and have supplied satellite networks with news feeds.⁵ Ben Mhenni is also known to be one of the few Tunisian online activists who courageously blogged and tweeted using their real names under deposed President Ben Ali's rule.

Ben Mhenni's online activism has further emphasized the role of the on-line space as a domain for sharing among activist youth notably the female. Her trilingual blog, conveying an element of glocalization, emphasizes the idea of sharing experiences and stances among women rendering courage

contagious. In response to an article written by Mhenni entitled: 'Tunisia: The short dresses disturb the police' (*Tunisie: Les robes courtées dérangent la police*) where she attacked the attitudes of some policemen toward her female friend who was abused for wearing a short dress, a Facebook friend has narrated a similar experience with the police and how she has shown them that she was not afraid: (they knew I was not afraid of them) (*..ils ont suque je n'avais pas peur d'eux*).⁶ The reciprocity of such element of sharing among Middle Eastern women could also be detected from Mhenni's reflection on the Egyptian blogger Shahinaz Abdel Salam's book (*Egypt: The Beginnings of Freedom*) (*Egypte, Les débuts de la Liberté*), which the former describes as 'a book which relates the life experience, the experience of a whole generation of bloggers and online activists who have dreamt, still dream and will keep on dreaming of changing the world in spite of all obstacles they may encounter on a path paved with thorns.'⁷

Online space as a tool for disseminating a culture of active citizenry

Six years later, the activism of Ben Mhenni and other young Middle Eastern women during the Arab uprisings is still ongoing but perhaps as developing with the development of the path of the Arab Spring. Lina Ben Mhenni, for example, who had reported human rights violations when security forces massacred people at the outset of the Arab Spring has transformed her activity within a democratically transforming Tunisia to disseminating a culture of human rights in Tunisian prisons. In her 'A Tunisian Girl' blogspot, she narrated how she has launched her 'Books to Prisons' initiative when she has learned how prisoners, particularly political prisoners, would go on hunger strikes to claim for their rights to read in prisons.⁸ She has also expressed her worry about how some of the books she has seen on the shelves of the prison library, which are Islamic fundamentalist in nature could be a fertile ground for fundamentalism and recruitment of Tunisians by extremist groups. When she learnt that offering books to prisons was possible after the submission of a request to the General Directorate of Prisons and rehabilitation centers, she and her father first decided to send some of their personal books to one or two prisons. Within her deployment of cyberspace as a domain for 'sharing',

Ben Mhenni has announced the beginning of the initiative on her personal book profile. To make her initiative larger, she decided to launch a special page for the initiative to receive more than 2,500 responses and to get more than 10 thousand books. In cognizance of the impact of the different tools of the online sphere as a powerful vehicle for communication, the information posted on Ben Mhenni's blog has been collected to be published on Youtube,⁹ and she has also alerted viewers on Twitter to her project¹⁰ in order to expand her public as arising in relation to the circulation of texts (Warner 2002:49-50). Ben Mhenni is still pursuing her project, quoting her, as her small contribution in the dissemination of a culture of human rights.¹¹

Conspicuously, these women online activists have reached some level of what I may call 'active citizenry maturity' with the budding democratic transformation materializing in the Middle East. The young Tunisian blogger Amira Yahyaoui could provide a tangible example of how her role as an activist could be transformed with the ongoing democratic transformation in Tunisia. 'Before, I was an activist against,' she says. 'How can I now build? We have to engage ourselves as youth, and then engage the work.'¹² During Ben Ali's regime, Yahyaoui was a member of the Tunisian anti-censorship and freedom of speech movement. Following the Tunisian revolution in early 2011, Yahyaoui was able to demonstrate how the role of civil society could transform from one that criticizes to one that helps. She is the founder and head of an NGO, *Al-Bawsala*, which monitors the Tunisian Parliament, Constitutional Assembly, and city halls and makes its data available to the Tunisian public to foster openness between the new government and its people.¹³ Through *al-Bawsala* and using new technologies, Tunisian citizens have become able to post questions for their parliamentarians and to receive their responses. The responses are further announced online for all readers to access.¹⁴ The goal as pointed by Yahyaoui is to educate Tunisian citizens who have previously lived under a corrupt dictatorship as to why their new government is significant in their day-to-day lives. She believes that while some reform has taken place among representatives, the public has not and this is what her NGO is working on changing.

In addition, Yahyaoui is a staunch believer of the role of women in the Tunisian revolution and thus works on advancing Tunisian women's fundamental rights. She posts, *I try to understand why someone can be against something as beautiful as freedom of expression or gender equality.*¹⁵ She envisages women's rights as the respect of women and their access to the public sphere just like men. For her, this does not solely mean the existence of an article in the constitution that would guarantee gender equality, but the translation of that equality in terms of allotting 50 percent of the ballot of any party to women. That, according to Yahyaoui, would not only ascertain that women will always be represented in the government, but that they will be actively recruited and educated by all parties. She works out of her conviction that they should chart their own approach to democracy in Tunisia believing that they *'have this huge responsibility to show to the world, and to the Arab world, that we can succeed. Even if we are focusing in Tunisia, we are doing it for the entire region.'*¹⁶

Online women activism in more conservative societies

Perhaps such form of active citizenry and inclusion of women could be expected in cases such as Ben Mhennior Yahyaoui who live in an open climate for women as Tunisia, but how could it materialize within closed and segregated societies like Saudi Arabia? With the momentum of the Arab Spring, Saudi women were seeking their right to vote in municipal elections like men as a form of inclusion (Young 2000). Still, Saudi women were not allowed to participate in 2011 elections because of the kingdom's social customs, as announced by King al-Saud. Following the examples of women's early endeavors to access the public sphere in women-confined contexts (Badran 2009), Saudi women managed to reach a middle ground by means of creating their own municipal elections in parallel to men's as a means toward their inclusion in a semi-public sphere. Through 'Baladi' (My Country), a woman national initiative campaigned online, Saudi women were called on to join on Facebook toward attaining the full participation of Saudi women in municipal elections as voters and candidates amid debates over the conflict between law and tradition. In spite of the efforts made, the turn-out was low for Saudi women since many did not

have personal ID cards, a requirement for voting. Though Saudi women could obtain ID cards without obtaining any one's permission, their lack of freedom of mobility in order to access the public space has made it difficult for some women to have ID cards. In addition, some women were not able to make it to the voting points due to their lack of mobility. Though there is no law that bans women from driving in Saudi Arabia, there is an unwritten rule supported by conservative Saudi Muslim clerics that has been enforced since 1957.

The online activism calling for women's participation in municipal elections has thus temporarily shifted to a campaign demanding that Saudi women should have the right to drive. Interestingly, the online campaign included a picture of a face-veiled woman driving while raising her two fingers as a token of success,¹⁷ which could exhibit that women could access the public space unrestrained by the distancing imposed by the face veil (Badran 2009). As stated on the *Women2Drive* website, the campaign aims to revive up a national campaign and to encourage women to post pictures of themselves while driving on social media.¹⁸ The first witnessed campaign took place in 1991, but apparently might not have garnered the same publicity or at least its publicity might not have had the chance to be quantified unlike the latter ones via social media tools such as number of viewers, followers or likes.

Though the tools used in the 2011 and 2013 campaigns were largely similar including Youtube, Facebook or Twitter, the discourse involved did not seem to be quite the same. In 2011, the rationale provided by Manal al-Sharif, a Saudi woman who posted online an 8-minute video of herself driving while explaining why Saudi women should drive, was necessity in cases of emergency, or when the husband or the man expected to take care of the woman was not around.¹⁹ The video was viewed more than 7 thousand times before it was taken down four days later,²⁰ which does not only unveil the state's harshness against women who are not expected to voice their rights, but also the state's awareness of the impact of social media in disseminating ideas among other women. By 2013, the cause of driving has become a matter of a citizen's right particularly as it was associated

with the right to vote or nominate oneself in elections demonstrating the maturation of women's online experience as dovetailed with the new democratic encounter materializing in the Middle East. Al-Sharif's words when invited by TEDGlobal in June 2013 could emblemize such maturity when she started her speech by asserting that people all over the world fight for freedom and rights whether against oppressive governments or oppressive societies, and by referring to herself as 'a woman (who was) always proud of (herself).'²¹ As part of her speech, she narrated how a Saudi woman named Najla al-Hariri drove before her, but though the latter had driven non-stop for four days in the streets of Jeddah and though she announced it, al-Hariri was not arrested since she did not video her driving act online - emphasizing the pivotal role of the online sphere as regards to publicity. Al-Sharif pinpointed that they 'needed proof'; namely, documentation via the online sphere and she played that role by filming herself while driving. She narrated that she got arrested for nine days for such act, but that by setting an example, some one hundred brave Saudi women later were driving but none were arrested this time, proudly announcing that 'we broke the taboo.' Through voicing her dilemma between the two totally different perceptions of her personality as a 'proud' Saudi woman who loves her country but who wants to change her society, al-Sherif has touched on the dynamism between the subject's inner space of consciousness and the external space of the world as reflecting the dynamism between the private and the public (Madanipour 2003). In this sense, al-Sharif and her likes have reconciled between their individuality as women and the society they live in where both realms are interdependent.

Looking for a celebrity to announce the 2013 campaign, many people contacted refused for fear of losing their followers. But when the 24 years old then French literature undergraduate studying in Canada, Lujain al-Hathloul, was contacted she immediately supported the campaign and the next day she posted a Keek Video, which was viewed by over 5 thousand people which in a way could announce that the 26th campaign for women driving has started. In her video as residing in Canada, she has appeared without covering her face which in itself is a form of claiming the public space, and has urged on women who did not have the chance to join the Drive

campaign in 1993 or in 2011 to join the 26 August 2013 Drive campaign.²² Her feminist stance could be evidenced from the way she has described men who would inhibit them from such practice as ‘oppressive’ stating that no religious legislation (*shari’*) or law prevents them from driving. Upon this understanding, al-Hathloul has emerged as a form of a counter-public – both a *product* and a *prerequisite* of new forms of discursive interaction (Negt and Kluge 1993:94). In this sense, she as one of those subordinated social groups could invent and circulate via online sphere counter-discourses with the aim of formulating oppositional interpretations of their identities and needs (Fraser 1992:123).

In spite of the fierce attacks al-Hathloul has received for posting her video, ranging from death threats and insults to false rumors, she did not back down in her stay in Canada. Rather, she booked a flight to Saudi Arabia and then drove herself from the airport while her father filmed her and posted the video online. The video was voiced by her father who described Hathloul as ‘driving happily’ to her home. Again, we could witness the complementarity between the online and public spheres where she has translated her initiative act via the online sphere into a tangible move claiming the public space, and then she has documented such move online for publicity. As a result of her act, al-Hathloul has been detained by Saudi authorities for more than a month not for defying the ban on women driving, according to some activists, but for her online advocacy for female driving in Saudi Arabia.²³ As al-Hathloul wanted to assume full responsibility and to avert her father’s punishment being responsible for her, she moved to the United Arab Emirates and married a Social Media activist who joined efforts with her to reignite the campaign for women to drive. Combining art and activism via the online sphere, her husband was one of the singers behind a hit Saudi Youtube video *No Woman, No Drive* which satirically calls on Saudi women not to drive since ‘queens don’t drive,’²⁴ thus making fun of the Saudi social belief which many Saudi women activists criticize as ‘a big lie.’²⁵

Thanks to the efforts of the likes of al-Sharif and al-Hathloul, the issue of driving, one of the socially constructed and religiously associated practices,

has become considered by religious authority as ‘not recommended’ rather than *harām* (religiously forbidden).²⁶ The progress as regards to the issue of driving has positively impacted other practices as related to the public sphere such that women have become allowed for the first time to vote and to be candidates in 2015. This does not mean that their path to democracy is no longer fraught with obstacles as they would still have to operate in gender-segregated campaign sites. Women candidates are not allowed to display their personal pictures, and they would need to assign men as representatives during their campaigns in case of having women voters. Yet with all these restrictions, many female candidates have posted their electoral platforms online accompanied with personal photos, and finally around 20 women have won seats in the December 2015 municipal elections.

Concluding remarks

Ever since Habermas theorized about the pivotal significance of the public sphere for modern liberal society, his theory has been widely criticized for its systemic exclusions of various types of people, notably women (Asad 2003:183-184). The public arena according to those critics does not simply constitute a forum for rational debate but rather an exclusionary space. The real challenge here is ‘to be heard’, that is, quoting Asad, ‘to make others listen even if they would not prefer to hear’ (Asad 2003:184). In practice, free public debate is not open equally to everyone since it is always bound by pre-established limits. That particularly applies to Middle Eastern women in Arabo-Islamic cultures. Attempts to study the intricate connectivity between gender, politics and the public sphere have gained momentum in these regions (Wang 2010:17), where ‘women’s visibility, women’s mobility, and women’s voices’ have become instrumental in shaping the frontiers of the public sphere (Gole 1997:61).

The hybridity of the private and the public exemplified in the online world has in effect played a pivotal role in rendering the visibility of Middle Eastern women in the political public sphere possible, where new media provides an effective vehicle for these women to establish social and political networks and organizations (Stephan 2007:62) as conducive to their em-

powerment. Free public debate in this sense does not simply materialize in a matter of abstract, timeless logic, but is ingrained by the time and space taken to build and express a particular argument (Asad 2003:184). The article posits that if the online space has provided the spatial locale for the inclusion of women under study in the public sphere, the developments within the Arab Spring have furnished the temporal locale pertaining to, citing Asad, the kind of person these women have become and want to continue to be. The interplay between the spatial and the temporal is what gives value to the activism of Middle Eastern women under study.

The term 'glocalization' has been borrowed from Hampton to refer to the role played by online media in linking the local with the global and in establishing communities regardless of distance. The women under study have not merely deployed online media to have access to the public sphere, but to foster new communities of potentially 'active' women who could identify with one another and who could learn from each other's experiences. The online shared experiences of the likes of Ben Mhenni could demonstrate how these women's courageous utilization of the online sphere has rendered courage contagious.

It is worthy to note that the activism of Middle Eastern women should not be presented as one category but is conditioned by the historical and cultural variations among them. The article has tried to demonstrate how these women activists have tried in different ways to utilize the online sphere as an alternative online-public - as a tool to reach people and to organize their collaborative activism on the ground in accordance with the specific cultural values of their countries. Following Hampton's theorization, the online media allows people to 'think globally and act locally' (Hampton 2001:174). In this sense, the Middle Eastern women under study who have been aspiring for having more freedom and rights as citizens (just like their Western counterparts) have not violated the norms and traditions of Arabo-Islamic societies where they belong. So an activist like the Saudi Hathloul was filmed as wearing the headscarf while driving to the Saudi borders in respect of the cultural and religious values of the country.

Though the goals for those women activists might differ based on the nature of their countries and though they might stand on different positions within the level of their access to the public sphere and within the democracy continuum, they have shown to have aptly traversed between the online and public spheres in order to enunciate their glocal experiences. Throughout their traversal between the online and the public, different levels of journeying have been crisscrossed - the private and the public, the social and the political, the local and the global. More importantly, different levels of transformations are materializing, whether as regards to the nature of their roles as activists or pertaining to the role of civil society at large.

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Notes

¹ The term *glocal* is believed to have its origins from the Japanese word *dochakuka* which means global localization. Originally, referring to a way of adapting farming techniques to local conditions, *dochakuka* developed into a market strategy when adopted by Japanese businessmen in the 1980s. It is believed that the coining of the English word *glocal* was made by Akio Morito, founder of Sony Corporation. In the 1990s, the term was introduced and popularized in the West by a number of sociologists including Keith Hampton, Manfred Lange, Barry Wellman and Zygmunt Bauman. For further information see Wayne Visser's blog briefing series, "Glocality: Thinking Global and Acting Local in CSR," http://www.waynevisser.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/blog_glocality_wvisser.pdf (July 11, 2011, accessed February 25, 2017).

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⁶ For further detail see Mhenni’s posting and the reply of her Facebook friend (in French), posted on July 2, 2012, available at <http://atunisiangirl.blogspot.com/2012/07/tunisie-les-robres-courtes-derangent-la.html> (accessed January 20, 2014)

⁷ For the original entry by Mhenni (in French), see her posting on July 3rd, 2012, <http://atunisiangirl.blogspot.com/2012/07/egypte-les-debuts-de-la-liberte-by.html> (accessed January 22, 2013).

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¹¹ Lina Ben Mhenni, April 30, 2016, The Initiative “Books to Prisons”: The Idea and the Developments, A Tunisian Girl Blog, <http://atunisiangirl.blogspot.com> (accessed August 11, 2016).

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Saudi Women and Socio-Digital Technologies: Reconfiguring Identities

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Abstract:

Drawing on research conducted in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, this paper explores the specific uses of digital technologies by Saudi women. It shows how these women – whose gender identity is strongly constrained by a host of social and religious norms characterizing Saudi society – make use of digital technologies, and particularly mobile telephones. The various applications available for mobile telephony open up to them a whole range of choices on how to communicate and use photography, thus enabling them to circumvent their assigned gender identity, at least at the margin.

Keywords:

social media, identity, Muslim women, gender, Saudi Arabia

Introduction

As part of a research project on Saudi women and digital technologies uses in Saudi Arabia,¹ this article² focuses on Saudi women's identity and how this is evolving through their specific uses. Indeed, the findings of the Individuals Report ICT Survey results³ (CICT 2015) on Saudi Arabia by the Saudi Communications and Information Technology Commission (CITC) show that information and communication technologies (ICT) usage is higher among women than men. This trend is contrary to that found in several Western countries, where Internet usage has been marked for many years by a gender divide that is predominantly masculine. However, in Saudi Arabia, a country characterized by gender segregation, the use of technology is higher for women. For Internet usage, the percentage of female users is 96 percent against 88 percent for male users (CICT 2015:15-16)⁴ and they spend more

time on-line: 45 percent of female web users report spending from four to eight hours a day on the Internet, compared with 25 percent of male users (CICT 2015:34-35). One of the main reasons is that, as the statutory gender identity assigned to women confines them more to the domestic space, they are more inclined to make use of these technologies. It is thus significant that their Internet connection rate is higher than that for men: 90.51 percent of female web users connect from their home, against 77.44 percent of male web users (CICT 2015:33). Furthermore, they also connect more to the Internet via smartphones: 78.36 percent against 72.48 percent for men (CICT 2015:47). But what chiefly characterizes their web usage, and particularly their mobile Internet usage, are their visits to socio-digital networking sites - a finding that also applies to the United States (Greenwood and al. 2016) and France (Croutte and Lautié 2016). These socio-digital networking sites are very popular with Saudi web users as they represent the foremost mobile Internet activity for both men and women (82.23 percent) (CICT 2015:50) and the country has the world's highest penetration of the microblogging sphere (GMI 2016) - 91 percent of web users use online social networks, 89.21 percent use WhatsApp, 75.79 percent use YouTube, 59.5 percent use Facebook, etcetera (CICT 2015:67-68). And the majority of users are women. Apart from Facebook, which is more popular with men (38.73 percent for women compared to 63.56 percent for men (CICT, 2015:69)), most online social networking is the women's domain (88.08 percent use WhatsApp against 77.18 percent for men, 45.6 percent use Twitter against 41.85 percent for men, 45.6 percent use Instagram against 35.38 percent for men, 25.76 percent use Snapchat against 17.72 percent for men (CICT 2015:69). More broadly, when it comes to personal use of digital technologies, a culture of mobile telephony unquestionably prevails, particularly among women, who are less often employed than men and thus, as housewives, they spend more time on digital technologies. Moreover, as they are forbidden from driving, they spend most of their transport time in chauffeured cars on their connected smartphone (public transport⁵ being underdeveloped and mainly used by migrant workers).

In a country that offers very little place for recreation and where young people - especially young women - are especially prone to a malaise known

as *tufshan*, which denotes a feeling of inadequacy, and boredom⁶ (Ménoret 2014), the cell phone offers a perfect tool for having fun, communicating, expressing oneself, while at the same time constructing your identity and forging social ties (Allard, Odin and Creton 2014). Multi-functional, it offers spaces of freedom and self-staging where you can show oneself on the sidelines of the social sphere. As a result, Saudi women invest this composite digital object with multiple values that are hedonistic, distinctive, expressive or expressivist in that the mobile object constitutes a medium for performing one's identity (Allard 2009), and even for creating multiple identities (Haraway 2007) given the profusion of "identity-expressive" applications and platforms available.

In light of these considerations, our interest here is to investigate the impact of Saudi norms and traditional codes on women's uses and behaviors on the Web, and several key questions have driven our approach. First, how and to what extent have women developed specific uses of digital technologies in a country characterized not only by strict gender segregation but also by a mix of modern technologies and rigorous religious traditions? Second, what behavior do Saudi women have on the Web regarding the photographic portrayal of the human form,⁷ given the gender norms of Saudi customs and society requiring women to cover their face?

Finally, we question whether women's uses of digital technologies lead them to shape a new identity or identities that which may overpass their assigned social role and duties.

Methodological approach

Saudi Arabia and its capital Riyadh were chosen as our research field because there are very few scientific studies that address the qualitative uses of digital technologies by Saudi women. In fact, the use of Internet in Saudi Arabia is considered to be "at its beginnings," and sparks heated controversy on whether it is an advantage or curse for society (Sadiq 2003). Extant studies (e.g., the above-cited CICT Individuals Report 2015) deal more with the perspective of improving the quality of Internet services, and

aim to help firms and public policy shape new digital systems. This study, however, has an innovative dimension in that it focuses on the qualitative usages of virtual space by a specific segment of the Saudi population, namely the women, whose behavior in “real” public and private spaces is extremely normed. Admittedly, there were many ethnographic hurdles, mainly due to the respondents’ gender, which also necessarily meant that we could only recruit women onto the research team. The hurdles also stemmed from the logistics involved, such as travelling around, making appointments and finding places to hold them - as women’s freedom of movement is limited in the public space. There were also technical constraints when the interviews had to be conducted using videoconferencing software.⁸ The qualitative survey also raised numerous methodological and epistemological questions. For the researcher, entering a new field of research, in an unusual context in a society whose values are extrinsic to those he usually encounters, invites him to step outside his comfort zone, to try and see the country through Saudi eyes, and become used to conditions such as potential control over what the respondents say⁹ given that the interviews were most often held in public spaces.

The research field is highly complex as it is difficult to access for both practical and cultural reasons: obtaining an entry visa¹⁰, the daily availability of a taxi driver for a female researcher since women are not allowed to drive and it is impossible to talk to a man for cultural reasons,¹¹ etcetera. A further difficulty, but one that was also an “epistemic privilege”,¹² lay in the gender of the project leader and her two assistants. Certainly, it would have been impossible to conduct a field survey on women without being a female.

This complexity shaped our methodological approach and led us to develop different tools to establish contact with the population studied. To apply our methodological plan, we thus had to employ several courses of action, including a questionnaire, interviews, and observation of profiles on all the social media and forums used by the sample population.

After having been put in touch with a teacher from a women’s university¹³ by the Service de coopération et d’action culturelle (Cooperation and Cul-

tural Department) at the French embassy in Riyadh, we organized a seminar during which we presented our research project and asked the students present if they would respond to our questionnaire. Rather than being a genuine methodological device, the questionnaire (written in French and translated into Arabic) was an artifice allowing us to make contact with young Saudi women and collect their contact details (email address and phone number) in order to obtain an interview with them to focus on their Internet and mobile usages. It included questions on their uses of the Web and social networks, and the frequency of utilization; the online identity used on social network sites (the profile picture chosen, the registration name, the address chosen for logging in, etc.); the relationship to photography and the choices made in sharing pictures online; and the digitalization of silver halide photographs. Two main waves of answers were received; the first (37 responses) mainly included a group of young female students from this university. The second (11 responses) comprised Saudi working women or students from other universities. In the interval between the first and second wave of responses, the questionnaire was slightly modified so that it could be better understood by the Saudi population. While the questionnaire drew a total of 48 responses, only ten women completed an interview:¹⁴ four face-to-face interviews were held in Riyadh, mainly in English with some Arabic, and seven interviews were conducted exclusively in Arabic using videoconferencing software (Line and Facetime), from France, with the university students.

Written in Arabic, the questionnaire thus helped us to collect contacts available for the interview, during which they gave more details on all the information covered in the questionnaire. The interviews themselves were initially conducted in English, but the use of a foreign language seemed to prevent the interviewees from expressing themselves fully and frankly. Moreover, when interviewed in English, the women tended to perceive the interview as having more of an “academic” nature. This triggered a mechanism of self-censorship, leading the women to want to present a positive picture of their country and avoid all criticism. Furthermore, the exchanges turned out to be less in-depth than when they were conducted in the interviewees’ native language. The following interviews were thus held

in Arabic, which created a more trusting atmosphere and enabled greater sincerity and communication. For all this, language was nonetheless an obstacle. The project leader did not master Arabic well enough to carry out the interviews. A third-party who mastered the Saudi dialect was thus brought in to help with translation but this actually created a barrier and negatively impacted the course of the interview. In the end, we chose to use English, with a little Arabic, for the face-to-face interviews and have no third-party present. The videoconferencing interviews were held totally in Arabic. Even so, although our female collaborators spoke Arabic, they did not master the Saudi language¹⁵, which has its own specificities. We were aware that this was another factor that impacted the relationship during the interview, and thus the results.

In addition to the 12 interviews, during which the respondents were asked to describe their personal use of digital technologies, and particularly their smartphone applications, which were pivotal in their expressive uses, we regularly followed the personal profiles (on Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, etc.) of the young women interviewed. We took screenshots of their publications and then analyzed the possible discrepancies between their discourse (during the interview) and their actual practice on the Web (their way of using social networks). We observed their choice of profile picture and the changes they made to it, the nature of their hashtags and tweets, their confidentiality policy, and their activity or passivity on the social media.

This methodological approach came up against several difficulties that had a fundamental impact on the research. The difference between what was said in the interviews and reality, the difficulty in arranging the interviews (conducted either through social media or face-to-face), and the need to dispel the Saudi women's initial suspicion and mistrust when questioned about their private use of social media were all key determinants of how we deployed our methodology plan, and were all factors that deeply influenced the research (Al-Saggaf and Williamson 2004). During the interviews, it was not rare to feel that the respondents were holding back on what they said and adopting an "acceptable" discourse in line with the norms and

values of Saudi society. This self-restraint was even more obvious when the interviews were held in a public place.¹⁶

Political and religious context of Saudi Arabia

To understand how women used the technologies, it was crucial to see the country through Saudi eyes and integrate the complexity of the Saudi identity and its historical, cultural, economic and geographic components (Ménoret 2003).¹⁷ Its identity does not conform either with that attributed to it by the Western media, or with the mainstream representations of Muslim women (Piela 2013). A glimpse of the historical origins of the Saudi State - founded on a partnership formed in the 18th century between the princes and the *ulama*¹⁸ (doctors of Islamic religion and law) from the Wahhabi school of Islam (Lacroix 2015) - reveals the regime's underlying tensions between the princes and *ulama* (Lacroix 2015), which reflect the complexity of this conservative regime. Geographically, Saudi Arabia is the largest country in the Gulf Region, covering about 2,149,690 km². In 2015, the country's population stood at 30.8 million, 43.5 percent of whom were women.¹⁹ Historically and politically, Saudi Arabia is a "young state," established in 1932 by King Abdulaziz bin Abdul Rahman Al-Saud, with Arabic as its official language and Islam as the official religion. The country's Bedouin heritage with its tribal identity and the dominant Sunni Wahhabi doctrine of Islam play a central role in society (Lacroix 2015) and deeply influence written and customary Saudi norms and rules, as well as social and gender relations. The Wahhabi doctrine is characterized by a literal reading and interpretation of Islamic sources: the *Qur'an*, the *Sunnah* (the traditions of the prophet Mohammad), and the *hadiths* (the words and acts attributed to Mohammad). It considers many of the *hadiths* to be authentic, whereas this authenticity is variously challenged in other Islamic schools. This rigorist religious tradition exerts a strong control over the Saudis' social behaviors since Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy and justice is administered through a system of religious courts in strict application of Islamic law (*sharia*). The *Qur'an* is thus not just a holy book, but also - together with the *Sunnah* - the country's constitution, and the primary source of *sharia* (Tønnessen 2016). Saudi Arabia, with its ultra-conserva-

tive religious system and heritage, experienced sudden and rapid economic growth thanks to the discovery of oil in the 1930s and the exploitation of these resources since the 1970s. The country now has around one fifth of the world's conventional oil reserves. The resulting economic wealth has had a major impact on Saudi Arabia and led to a rapid uptake of modern technologies. On the other hand, the Iranian Shi'a revolution of 1979 also impacted Saudi Arabia, as it prompted the country to strengthen its religious leadership of the Sunni community (Hamdan 2005). In this singular setting, the role of women in Saudi society has long been a subject of debate. Some authors, such as Madawi Al-Rasheed (2013), consider that the status of women is due more to a tacit partnership between the Al-Saud royal family and Wahhabism (headed by the *ulama*) in order to further their political and religious interests, than to Islamic culture and the religion itself.

Until 2001, women were seen as “an extension of their male guardians” (Hamdan 2005), if only in civil life, as before this date women did not possess their own identity card but registered as a member of their father's or husband's family. Their freedom to move around, and participate in public life is deemed by religious police (employed by Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice) to derive from dangerous “Western ideas” (Arebi 1994), especially since American presence in the country became highly visible due to the USA's involvement in Saudi oil production. At the end of the 1990s, reform movements emerged calling for democratic change within an Islamic framework. A prime example was the petition launched by intellectuals in 2003 and presented to the Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud (Lacroix 2004). In line with this trend, King Abdullah (1924-2015) embarked on various reforms in favor of women. Since 2014,²⁰ women have no longer needed permission from their adult male “guardian” (*mahram*) to work. Even so, many companies still ask for this authorization under the pressure of social conformism or for fear of contravening tradition. Saudi Arabia is a country that strongly forbids a mixing of the sexes, and gender segregation has become a national moral hallmark that distinguishes the Saudi population from resident foreigners (Le Renard 2011a:155), who represent some 33 percent of the total population.

The social status of women in Saudi Arabia and their access to the socio-digital networks

Saudi Arabia, and especially its capital Riyadh, is highly gender-segregated, which has often led to large gender inequalities that are evident in the women's absence and silencing in public life (Smith 1987). Hamdan (2005:45) suggests that "the uniqueness of the Saudi women's situation is derived from their presence and yet non-presence in the public sphere." A major issue that strongly limits Saudi women compared to men is mobility. Apart from the fact that they are not allowed to drive, they are constrained by the male guardianship system which impacts women's everyday life. Women need a *mahram's* authorization to travel, benefit from health care, get married or leave prison after serving a prison sentence (Tønnessen 2016). Gender segregation is thus enshrined in the law and justified by the constraints of the surrounding society, as for example, the need to avoid being exposed to the dangers of the city and public spaces (Le Renard 2011a). This context explains the dress codes for women, who are compelled to wear the *abāya* - a long over-garment, generally black in Riyadh - and the *hijab*, which is a scarf covering the head, or even the *niqāb*²¹, a veil covering a part of the body and the face, except for the eyes.

Gender segregation is the result of a compromise between the Government and the State's religious authorities (Vassiliev 2000:310), dating back to the 1960s when gender mixing was officially forbidden at school and at work.

As for education and employment, the first university women's campus at Riyadh's King Saud University, opened its doors in 1979. However, until 2002, women's education was overseen by the Department of Religious Guidance, rather than by the Ministry of Education, which was in charge of male education (Hamdan 2005:44-51). Since that time, women's education programs have stressed the importance of proper ethical behavior, which implies their being controlled outside the school or university walls - in all public spaces - by the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, or in other words, the Saudi religious police (Hamdan 2005). Gender norms are everywhere and permanently weigh on women's

conduct, which has to be in keeping with that of “girls from a good family” (Le Renard 2011a:169). Nevertheless, women’s access to university has not led to equal access to the labor market. In 2015, the Central Department of Statistics and Information reported that the percentage of women university graduates is much higher than that for male graduates: 66.6 percent of working women have a university degree as compared to only 26.9 percent of men. However, Saudi women represent 70 percent of the unemployed population and 71.3 percent of women aged 25-39 years are unemployed, while the percentage of unemployed men in the same age group is 46.6 percent (Koyame-Marsh 2016:462-463).

In his analysis of Saudi society’s gender segregation and inequality, Le Renard (2014) has evoked the concept of “homosociality,” which designates the fact of sharing common social spaces, based notably on one’s gender, such as the place of work or study, shopping malls, etcetera - all of these being spaces that enable individuals to create a collective (gender) identity. This concept is relevant to characterize young urban Saudi women. In fact, this group tends to develop a new and distinct identity through the use of women-only public spaces, such as shopping malls, universities, and rooms for young women’s religious meetings. These young urban girls share similar lifestyles and develop a new approach to the public sphere, which now includes spaces reserved for them. The new identity that homosociality tends to foster eventually bridges the social and tribal gaps that prevailed in the previous generations and highlights the aspects unifying this group, such as the fact of being “young women, citizens of Riyadh,” or “young women experts on religious issues.” The Internet represents one of these spaces of homosociality, “a space of autonomy, wrested from the family” (Le Renard 2014:169). More than all the other spaces, the Web allows the crossing of borders and “since Saudi women, as all women in any given society, differ in their class, race, and cultural background, to challenge gender inequality, there is an urgent need for them to cross borders and ignore their cultural and class differences” (Hamdan 2005:46). The Internet can thus play a crucial role.

Public access to the Internet in Saudi Arabia began in 1999, which was late compared to the rest of the world. However, from 2000 to 2009, the

service penetration rate increased by 3.750 percent, which means that the service growth rate in Saudi Arabia was almost ten times the world's service growth rate over the same period (Simsim 2011; Online Project 2015). If the results of the Individuals Report ICT Survey results (CICT 2015) show that women use more digital technologies than men, They also show that compared to the other socio-professional categories, students are the largest Internet users (97.96 percent) and those who declare that they are "Always connected" to online social networks and respond as and when needed represent 49.32 percent of the student population (CICT 2015:74). The report also found that the usage of Internet through mobile telephony is higher among those aged 20-29 (76.42 percent) and lowest for the eldest 50-65 age group (47.90 percent) according to the same report (CICT 2015:47).

Given the widespread diffusion of information and communication technologies devices in Saudi society and their high rate of utilization by Saudi women, social networks and smartphone applications have had significant success. According to the Dubai School of Government (2011), in 2011, Saudi Arabia accounted for over 40 percent (2.4 million users) of all active Twitter accounts in the Arab region. As such, Saudi Arabia appeared in the top five largest active Twitter populations in the Arab region, including Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Egypt (Dubai School of Government 2011). Moreover, the country has the highest per capita YouTube use of all countries in the world. Concerning mobile applications such as WhatsApp and Snapchat, the Global Web Index report says that the Kingdom comes in tenth globally for use of WhatsApp. As for Snapchat's base in the Kingdom, this is growing fast and the majority of users range from 16 to 20 years old (Globalwebindex 2015). According to a British research company cited in the Saudi press, 8.2 million Saudis use Snap daily, 45 percent of the users are male and 55 percent female,²² and Saudis are the top users of Snapchat in the Arab world, and second worldwide.²³

Given the rapid success of social networks, the positioning of the governmental and juridical authorities that rule on the citizens' use of the In-

ternet is not always stable. In 2015, the Twitter account of King Salman (@KingSalman) attracted two million new followers in six months (Jones and Al Omran 2015). The long-term vision of the Saudi Government is “the transformation into an information society and digital economy so as to increase productivity and provide communications and information technology services for all sectors of the society in all parts of the country and build a solid information industry that becomes a major source of income” (Simsim 2011:102). The Saudi Government continues to promote Internet use as a tool for economic development and e-government services (Freedomhouse 2016). Nevertheless, the authorities have institutionalized repression on the grounds of the fight against terrorism and cybercrime. These measures have instilled fear into activists and ordinary social media users alike, creating an environment of pervasive self-censorship (Human Rights Watch 2014) in the country.

We now further explore the question of women’s usage of social media and the factors that determine the everyday choices that they make when deciding whether or not to publish information, a picture, a video or a tweet. A key question involves the way that women self-present on the Web and the extent to which official and traditional norms influence this. The profile picture and other personal pictures that may be published on a social network account are among the main features of every social network. On the other hand, they represent a topic that is closely linked to the issue of women’s visibility. In fact, there is no law in Saudi Arabia that officially bans the publication of personal pictures showing the human form, but the issue is widely debated among the country’s Muslim scientific community, some members of which consider that taking such photos is illicit. Their stance is based on some of the Prophet’s hadiths that forbid images of the human form, seen as an emulation of the divine creation.²⁴

However, the Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Issuing Fatwas,²⁵ along with the fatwas issued in Saudi Arabia, has decreed that photography does not constitute an imitation of the divine creation, as photographs can be compared to a mirror and thus taking them is not

an illicit act. As a result, the Saudi religious courts do not condemn picture-taking, neither do they forbid Saudi women from publishing personal photos on the social networks.

In fact, what usually restrains women from sharing their personal pictures on social media is not the prevailing norms or sanctions, but rather the potential manipulation of a woman's pictures by hackers, as this could strongly affect her own reputation as well as her family's. What is at stake here is more a question of culture and tradition than one of religion. Reputation and the wish to adhere to strict rules of etiquette and social convention remain the foremost concern of Saudi women and also explain why Saudi men usually personalize their profile pictures online, whereas women do not.

Women's visibility in the virtual space: strategies to bypass rules and codes

The Web has unquestionably brought a certain visibility to Saudi women. If only because of the dress codes they have to conform to, they have learnt how to become "invisible", at least in mixed spaces. They have of course used many strategies to bypass this social injunction for social invisibility, for example, by frequenting places such as shopping malls (Le Renard 2014) or upmarket cafés that are "reserved" for women (here, they outnumber men) - places where they are splendidly attired in fashion accessories and the like often from Western labels. Despite these strategies to circumvent norms that comply with *khalwa* (seclusion), the modes of women's expression and visibility remain constrained by the pervasiveness of these dominant norms and codes. However, without paving the way for a certain technological determinism, the Web has certainly extended these strategies into other spaces. While some transgressive phenomena such as *boyat* - taken from the English "boy" to describe women who adopt a masculine style - were already present in these homosocial spaces, social networking sites have opened real spaces for expression and visibility that allow women to perform and consolidate the expressivity of self, whether or not this bypasses the norm of the dominant gender. This does not mean

that the women no longer comply with the codes governing these spaces, but that some of them seize on the technical potential - digital profiles using aliases, specific formatting for messages and photos, etcetera - to contravene social norms (Guta and Karolak 2015) through self-staging and self-expression.

Saudi women's self-presentation on the Web, and particularly on socio-digital networks, is essential to understanding their digital usages. Two main aspects of self-presentation have guided this research, namely the confidentiality policy chosen by Saudi women (i.e., to whom do these women allow access to their social profile), and the factors they consider when deciding whether or not to publish a personal picture. The main question underlying both issues is that of women's visibility in the virtual space. We explore to what extent this differs from their visibility in real space, mentioned above, and is deeply normed. We steered the interviews onto these issues (confidentiality policy and way of sharing pictures) and concluded that two main elements influence Saudi women's visibility on the Web, in two different ways. These elements are instantaneity and anonymity.

Instantaneity: a new identity every day

In Saudi Arabia, the act of taking pictures of the human form is defined by tradition and social codes. Mariam ²⁶ (aged 30), a Saudi university student, explained to us that in her country marriage celebrations are never mixed, but she also pointed out: "The groom is only allowed to enter the space reserved for women at a specific moment during the celebration, and only to take souvenir pictures with the bride. The groom's entry into women's space means that the other women must again put on their *abāya* and cover their head" [with a *niqāb*].

The rules governing social life are reflected in the virtual sphere of life, and thus in the relation to photography and its diffusion on social media. The interviews we conducted show that the women are constantly trying to find a balance between the role of pictures on social networks and the Saudi customs and traditions on taking, visualizing, and sharing pic-

tures. They try to place themselves on middle ground between compliance with the rules on the separation of public/private space, or the licit/illicit, and the characteristics and features specific to social networks.

In all of the interviews, we noted that Saudi women very frequently take pictures of themselves. These can often be private and intimate pictures (i.e., without the scarf), where they are very well coiffed, dressed, and made-up. They take this kind of picture alone or with friends or sisters and share them on the Web to show themselves and to inform their friends and family - mainly females - of their activities. They certainly have a strong desire to show themselves, but when they take a picture, these women are faced with a first choice: whether or not to post the picture. This choice is carefully thought out and never immediate or irrational. They take into consideration the space in which the picture was taken, the subject of the picture, and its privacy setting. Arwa (aged 37, supervisor and tutor), who lives in a well-to-do part of Riyadh and works at a Saudi Ministry,²⁷ explained to us that she never publishes a picture taken with her husband in a private space on social media, but she does publish it when they are in public spaces. As she commented: “I don’t know what ‘private’ means exactly for you, but, you know, there is a privacy that we can’t transgress. For example, I don’t snap [share a picture on Snapchat] while I’m with my husband in a private space, I don’t share pictures of us in the private spaces. If we are in the public space or in the car it is fine, but at home, no, I won’t publish it.”

The example of Arwa shows the extent to which the rules governing the public sphere spill over into the virtual world. However, from a woman’s viewpoint, the technical and social possibilities offered by applications such as Snapchat mean that women can now “show” themselves in line with the prevailing social codes: the pictures they share are simply representations of themselves. Moreover, an intimate picture can be shared on the Web, even with male strangers, if the picture does not last; on condition that it is “fleeting” and “escapes” any kind of storage or archival. As no trace remains, this means that she is able to keep her reputation intact.

In fact, the specific advantage of the Snapchat mobile application is that it allows the exchange of files but these are automatically deleted once visualized. This means that it is possible to chat with friends, send them pictures or videos, and then also decide on the lapse of time that the recipient has to view the photo. The application also has features for modifying pictures and adding emojis, stickers or humorous items. Moreover, it notifies the sender whenever the recipient takes a screenshot of the traces - which, of course, serves as an indication of the recipient's level of trustworthiness. However, various methods are now available whereby a "snap" can be saved permanently without the sender's knowledge (taking a photo with a camera, using a screenshot affordance, downloading specific apps, etc.). While these strategies "divert" the rules of the application (which prohibit such screenshots), above all, they could potentially expose Saudi women to dangers such as being blackmailed with content likely to compromise them regarding their compliance with public morals.²⁸ A self-portrait (selfie) of an unveiled woman circulating untowardly on social networks could be detrimental to its author. Then, in July 2016, Snapchat developed a "Memories" feature enabling users to create their own personal collection of Snaps and Stories, which are saved to the Snapchat servers.²⁹

According to the Oxford Dictionary, a *selfie* is a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically with a smartphone or webcam and *shared on social media*. Saudi women take self-portraits, because they share pictures of themselves, on the condition of instantaneity. And this certainly helps explain the resounding success of social media in Saudi Arabia, such as Snapchat oscillates between two expressive forms: the self-portrait and the cartoon. As in the self-portrait, the selfie or the snap (the main type of picture shared on Snapchat) is based on an artifice of duplication; the photographer interprets two roles simultaneously: she is the subject of the action and its object. In the past, the reasons that pushed an artist to paint self-portraits were intimate: a self-investigative tension in order to defy time and death. The reason behind the success of the selfie and the snap is not rooted in the dimension of memory, traces and fear of passing time, but relates more to the desire to self-present, create alternative profiles of

oneself, and finally to attract others' attention. As Jonas (2008) suggests, digital photography is a moment that we share and we forget.

In this process, the difference between a selfie and a snap is the decisive moment for modification. By adding effects and filters, we can circumvent the objectivity of a normal photograph. Snapchat represents an immense ephemeral masquerade that allows us to change identity (and even sex) many times a day. Yet, these "snaps" - immaterial digital elaborations - do not live on eternally; they are destined to self-destruction, leaving no trace behind them.

One question that could be asked, however, is to what extent the use of such applications may be subversive since, by overstepping the frontiers of intimacy, they enable transgression of the rules of decency.

Snapchat's ephemeral and instantaneous features, combined with the illusion of creating new - albeit only playful - identities, explain the application's enormous success among young Saudi women. May (aged 24), a university student in Riyadh, confided to us that she uses Snapchat and sends intimate photos and personal videos to male friends in which she is not wearing a scarf, as she knows that the pictures will last only few seconds, then disappear. She explained that she receives appreciative comments from these men and is not bothered by their comments, but rather enjoys receiving them. This behavior could be strongly condemned in Saudi Arabia for courting the dangers of sexual mixing. Nevertheless, social media hijack this taboo, ultimately rendering such behavior "acceptable" in the eyes of Saudi girls, as long as everything takes place in the virtual space. By removing the fear of being hacked and having one's reputation as a woman damaged, instantaneity resolves the complex relation to taking and sharing self-pictures.

Conclusion

Traditional Saudi norms and codes view the visibility of women as problematic, and tend to implicitly condemn women's self-presentation through

pictures and videos. In contrast, instantaneity makes such representation possible, allowing pictures to link up with Saudi women's identity, thus creating a space where women can become visible.

Thanks to applications such as Snapchat, the Web not only represents a space where women can be physically present, but it also creates a new space for discussion where women can become informed about their social position and express their ideas. Social networking sites thus offer new spaces for homosociality given that research on the usage of these sites shows that individuals tend to develop networks that fall into already existing sociabilities (Casilli 2010:26), intensify these networks (Cardon 2011:145) and sometimes connect them up with new networks. Yet, as an extension of what exists in the shopping malls, which are spaces that women have appropriated to display a "visibility" and assert themselves (Le Renard 2014), social networking sites also constitute heterosocial spaces in that they offer the possibility of hi-jacking prevailing social codes. A woman can send a man other than her father or male siblings a photograph of her unveiled face. Certainly, anonymity offers an ideal way of communicating, as it avoids negative reactions from their family or other social institutions. The women can decide to open an account using an alias, create their own invisible community, and discuss freely with their virtual friends. Abeer (aged 22), a university student, describes her Twitter account, which is anonymous, and opens with these words: "I share my own ideas. If I had some members of my family on this account, my ideas would be limited and conditioned by their presence.... I don't want to create brutal family debates... I share all this with myself and with the society that I have on Twitter, a society that I have built in a confidential and private way."³⁰

Anonymity creates new identities, which are fake but "active," or in other words, offer the freedom to express personal opinions and explore forbidden subjects. Of course, not all Saudi women choose this type of social media profile. Most of the girls that we interviewed insisted that they always carefully tend their online profile, as they want to fit the image of the "girl from a good family." These girls do not therefore use anonymity,

and identify themselves on the social media with their real first name and family name.

Summing up, the Internet is not a space in which Saudi women defy head-on their social reality, gender segregation and gender inequality. However, it is a space where these women can make choices, decide what self-image they wish to communicate, and find a way to circumvent rules and codes, perhaps shaping new identities for themselves. Regardless of gender norms, which mainly derive from religion and tradition, Saudi women have now found subversive ways of using spaces such as mobile Internet and notably social networking sites, where they can become visible and express themselves.

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Notes

¹ Entitled FANAS (*Femmes et usages mémoriaux et patrimoniaux du numérique en Arabie Saoudite* [Women and memorial and heritage uses of digital technologies in Saudi Arabia]), this project (2015-2017) is part of the network *Usages des Patrimoines Numérisés* (Uses of Digitalized Heritages - UDPN) coordinated by the Université Sorbonne-Nouvelle Paris 3. This research is a continuation of the ENEID - Digital Eternities project (2013-2017), funded by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche. The research is ongoing and at this stage the results are still exploratory.

² We thank Gill Gladstone, an English-speaking translator, who did much to improve the quality of the text, and Omar Kurdi for his careful rereading and advice. We would also like to thank the Alliance Française in Riyadh (and especially Amina Hammad) and all those who helped us with our project.

³ The analysis is based on a total sample of 3,000 respondents from across the Kingdom, 1,876 of whom were Saudi nationals (62.54 percent). The percentage of Saudi male respondents is 34.89 percent, and Saudi female respondents 27.65 percent.

⁴ These statistics should nonetheless be viewed with caution insofar as the use of applications is developing very quickly in Saudi Arabia.

⁵ Several subway lines are under construction and due to come into operation late 2018.

⁶ The introduction of recreation and entertainment are included in the objective of an ambitious program for reform and economic diversification, Vision 2030, launched in April 2017 by Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the Saudi King's son.

⁷ Although the question of Islam is not evoked in the field of research, we should nonetheless underline both the complex relationship between Islam and photographs representing the

human form, and also the religious heritage that requires women to adopt a code of bodily modesty.

⁸ Some videoconferencing software programs such as Skype or Face Time are blocked to protect the commercial interests of the communication operators and to control communications. To get around this obstacle, it is necessary to be equipped with a Virtual Private Network (VPN).

⁹ The scope of this text does not deal with purely methodological questions. These will be fully addressed in a forthcoming paper.

¹⁰ Saudi Arabia does not deliver tourist visas. Foreigners who are admitted are migrant workers, Muslims on the Haj pilgrimage to Mecca or visitors invited by foreign residents in the country. We were able to obtain a long-stay visa for personal reasons and carry out this research.

¹¹ We were well aware that examining the practices of one gender category, here of women, is always problematic when one does not take an interest in the other categories (men, transgender, etc.) - even on an exploratory basis. This could well have the effect of influencing our understanding of the social sphere. The attempt to interview a man, albeit informally, revealed the limits of such an undertaking as following the interview the person involved sent us a text message with compromising content.

¹² Inspired (among others scholars) by the work of the American feminist Peggy McIntosh, the notion of “epistemic privilege”, which we remodel here, does not refer to the privileges enjoyed by the dominant (e.g., the fact of being a white Western male belonging to the advantaged social classes, etc.) but to the fact of our belonging to a sex and class here enabled us to access the feminine part of the social world. We would like to thank Marco Dell’Omodarme (Université Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne) for the exchanges we had on this subject.

¹³ For reasons of confidentiality, we do not give the name of the university.

¹⁴ We do not include in the scope of this exploratory paper the second interview campaign, including 15 interviews, conducting in February and April 2017, exclusively in Saudi Arabia.

¹⁵ We had not find a research assistant mastering the local dialect.

¹⁶ One often hears that the *mukhabarat* (intelligence services) are very present in public places.

¹⁷ We should point out that we are not specialists of Saudi Arabia, but of digital technologies and gender questions. This field was totally new to us and the exploratory interviews very soon prompted us to study the complexity of the regime and its way of life in order to better understand the opinions expressed.

¹⁸ “*Ulama*” (علماء) is the Arabic word for Islamic scholars (plural).

¹⁹ Source: <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL.FE.ZS?locations=SA>, “Population, female (percent of total)”, accessed March 16, 2017.

²⁰ This guide on women’s work published by the Ministry of Labor follows on from the Royal Decree No. A/121 enacted by King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud on June 3, 2011 (i.e. July 2, 1432 AH, according to the Hijri calendar followed by Saudi Arabia). See: <https://portal.mol.gov.sa/ar/ProgramsAndInitiatives/PublishingImages/Women%20working%20guide.pdf> (in Arabic).

²¹ The *niqāb*, most common in the Gulf States, must not be confused with the *burqa*, a dress that covers the whole body and face, except for the eyes, which are covered by netting. Mostly blue, the *burqa* is worn specifically by Afghan women. This dress code is more cultural than religious, as Islam does not advocate covering a woman’s face.

²² See: <http://saudigazette.com.sa/life/art-and-culture/meet-the-snapchat-team-in-saudi-arabia/>, accessed June 7, 2017.

²³ See: <http://www.arabnews.com/saudi-arabia/news/881841>, accessed June 7, 2017.

²⁴ Among the *hadiths* that are used as an argument by the groups of the religious elite, are found: “The people who will receive the severest punishment on the Day of Resurrection will be those who try to make the like of Allah’s creation” (Al-Bukhari, 7/542, no. 838), or “The people who receive the severest punishment on the Day of Resurrection will be those who try to Imitate Allah’s Creation” (Al-Bukhari 7/541, no. 835)

<http://fatwa.islamweb.net/fatwa/index.php?page=showfatwa&Option=FatwaId&Id=1935>, accessed March 16, 2017.

²⁵ Created by the King, this body publishes the rules of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and prepares research papers informing the King of the religious arguments.

²⁶ For reason of confidentiality, personally identifiable information like names used have been changed.

²⁷ For reasons of confidentiality, we do not cite the name of the ministry concerned.

²⁸ We did not meet any Saudi women who had experienced this type of blackmail; most of the respondents actively use social networking sites, and keep a careful eye on their accounts.

²⁹ See: <https://support.snapchat.com/en-GB/article/using-memories>, accessed June 7, 2017.

³⁰ This excerpt has been translated from Arabic into English.

Science and Islam Videos: Creating a Methodology to Find “All” Unique Internet Videos

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Abstract:

This methodology article explores the process through which we sought to catalogue videos addressing natural science and Islam on the Internet comprehensively. This data was then used to select videos for inclusion in the Center for the Study of Science in Muslim Societies’ Science and Islam Video Portal (www.scienceandislamvideos.com), which evaluates the videos based on their representations of science, Islam and history. As a growing body of research is demonstrating, Internet videos provide a window into the lives of both celebrity and ordinary Muslims and their critics worldwide. The article describes the methodological decisions of what to include and exclude from the study, framing them in a discussion of some of the key terms. We then step through the process of searching for videos and cleaning the data, providing flow charts with details. In the last section of the article, we discuss the results and their ramifications on our continuing research.

Keywords:

media studies, Islam, social media, video

Introduction

This methodology article explores the process through which we sought to catalogue videos addressing natural science and Islam on the Internet comprehensively. The project, funded by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation, produced a web site with evaluations of a selection of the videos identified in the cataloguing process (www.scienceandislamvideos.com). The project was to compile the widest possible array of video materials, from educational presentations to spoofs. To keep cataloguing manageable in an English-speaking context, videos were limited to those in English or with English subtitles, although of course one may find videos

in most of the major languages of the world as well. This article presents some of the methodological choices and challenges to lay the groundwork for future studies and to facilitate growth in the field.

As a growing body of research is demonstrating (e.g. Petersen 2016), Internet videos provide a window into the lives of both celebrity and ordinary Muslims and their critics worldwide. The number of people who are able to engage with and through these videos has expanded with the advent of cell phones capable of presenting videos. In addition to entering into wider discourses through creating videos, users may re-upload others' videos to different platforms (web sites) or channels, amplifying the message, join conversations by embedding videos in chat discussions on forums like Reddit, or add comments to existing videos. To begin these discussions, however, we must have some conception of how many different videos, presented by which speakers on what topics, are available on the Internet, if only at one particular moment in time.

We begin our discussion by presenting prior work surveying Internet videos addressing Islam, demonstrating the context for our different approach. We then present the narratives of Islam and science within which the video search was conducted, fitting our work into the disciplines of media studies and applied research on Internet search engines. The methodological decisions of what to include and exclude from the study are framed in a discussion of some of the key terms that we found it necessary to define. We then step through the process of searching and cleaning the data, providing flow charts with details. In the last section of the article, we discuss the results and their ramifications for continuing research.

Prior work on Islamic Internet videos

Given the relative newness of collections of videos on the Internet - YouTube was created in 2005 and currently ranks as the second most popular website in both the US and the world (www.alex.com/topsites, accessed 8 May 2017) - it is unsurprising that nearly all of the literature on Internet videos and Islam is from the past seven years. While YouTube has expand-

ed its market greatly, it has also been a target of censorship in countries like Turkey and Pakistan (Vara 2014; Nabi 2013). For this reason the study of online videos needs to include other platforms as well. *Platforms* here may include a wide variety of Internet sites. In addition to YouTube, owned by Google, there are other video hosting sites, such as DailyMotion (popular in Europe), Tune.pk (popular in Pakistan and South Asia), and Vimeo (popular for some for not having the sometimes-onerous community standards issues that YouTube does). These sites make no effort to curate the content, unlike older web sites that sometimes included pages of videos in a wide variety of formats focused on particular topics. By *curated* we mean that a user (or group of users) have shaped the presentation of videos in much the same manner a museum or gallery might (Crick 2016:26). We have found that with the rise in popularity of YouTube and similar platforms, these older curated sites are no longer being supported, and in some cases the content has shifted to individual *channels* (or user-defined spaces) that may shape the content through playlists or *tags* (user-supplied keywords) appended to the video.

Table 1 organizes the research we have identified on videos and Islam. It must be noted that every study is based on material from YouTube alone. The group of articles done by van Zoonen, Vis and Mihelj provides some sophisticated analyses of the videos, including analysis of the user networks that the material they obtained from YouTube provided (van Zoonen, et al. 2010; van Zoonen, et al. 2011; Vis, et al. 2011; Hirzalla, et al. 2013). These studies focused on YouTube video responses to the anti-Islamic film, *Fitna* (2008), a sixteen-minute short film by Geert Wilders (Larsson 2013). Their methodology uses software they developed with Michael Thelwall and examines both the videos and the social networks through which users engaged with the videos (Vis, et al. 2010). Their data includes up to 1,413 videos (“unique uploads”) and their attached comments, which they segment in various ways depending on the study. Their data was all uploaded in a four-month window in 2008, material which they downloaded and stored. They have attempted to contact individual users, and obtained 40 responses, but analyses drawn from that additional data have not yet been published as far as we know (Vis, et al. 2010:6).

| Author(s) | Date | Platform | Sample Size | Analysis of | Uploaders contacted? |
|-----------------------------------|-------|----------|----------------------------------|--|----------------------|
| Samuel & Rozario | 2010 | YouTube | 3 speakers/ series | Discussion of major speakers/ creators | no |
| van Zoonen, Vis & Mihelj | 2010 | YouTube | 776 videos uploaded Feb-May 2008 | videos | no |
| Vis, Thelwall, van Zoonen, Mihelj | 2010 | YouTube | 1,413 unique uploads | video | yes, 40 people |
| van Zoonen, Vis & Mihelj | 2011 | YouTube | 776 videos uploaded Feb-May 2008 | networks among users | no |
| Vis, van Zoonen & Mihelj | 2011 | YouTube | 63 videos uploaded by 46 women | videos | no |
| Hirschkind | 2012 | YouTube | 9 videos | Exploration of videos and comments | no |
| Mosenghlishvili & Jansz | 2013 | YouTube | 150 videos | valence framing in videos | yes, 15 people |
| Svensson | 2013 | YouTube | 374 videos, with their comments | videos and comments | no |
| Al-Rawi | 2014 | YouTube | 3 user channels | comments only | no |
| Wheeler | 2014 | YouTube | 2 vloggers, 6 videos | Discourse of Muslim women in video | no |
| Al-Rawi | 2015a | YouTube | 261 videos, 4,153 comments | “frames” | no |

| Author(s) | Date | Platform | Sample Size | Analysis of | Uploaders contacted? |
|-----------|-------|----------|--|--|----------------------|
| Al-Rawi | 2015b | YouTube | videos and comments from 7 user channels (3,165 videos, 17,708 comments) | comments, based on word/phrase frequency | no |
| Pedersen | 2016 | YouTube | 8 videos | Discussion of one vlogger | no |

Table 1. Summary of prior literature.

Mosemghvlshvili and Jansz use a similar approach and they also interview some of the users who created the videos (Mosemghvdlshvili and Jansz 2013). Their study focuses on video blogs, examining the framing and motivations of the users who created the videos. They select videos by drawing from two YouTube lists: (1) relevance based on their keyword, from which they draw the top fifty, and (2) a random selection of one hundred videos from those uploaded in one particular month. From this data they approached users and interviewed fifteen of them.

Svensson’s analysis of reactions to celebrations of the *mawlid* holiday, which celebrates the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, is based on searches done within YouTube and sampled in two different ways: (1) from the two sets of one thousand returns each, he selects 324 videos randomly, and (2) from a second sampling of 25 videos that included comments from each of the two return sets (Svensson 2013). The bulk of his discussion comes from his analysis of those comments. These sets of one thousand returns are limits imposed by YouTube.

Ahmed K. Al-Rawi’s work also focuses on the YouTube platform and uses software created by Michael Thelwall (Al-Rawi 2015a; al-Rawi 2014;

Al-Rawi 2015b; Thelwall 2009). As noted in Table 1, he limits material by focusing on *channels* (user pages) that are of particular interest based on the topic of the article, such as channels created to cover protests in Bahrain in 2011 or the Danish Muhammad cartoons. He analyzes comments using QDA Miner Wordstat software, which generally points out the “most recurrent words and phrases” (Al-Rawi 2015b:31).

Other researchers, rather than starting with YouTube searches for videos, follow ethnographic discussions with respondents toward a limited number of videos that are represented as exemplars. For example, Hirschkind’s research on recorded Friday sermons in mosques (*khutbas*) come from his pursuit of the topic based on information from his respondents while in Egypt (Hirschkind 2012). He discusses videos as a part of the cultural spheres in which the respondents move. In this way his research is not an effort to survey material across the Internet comprehensively. Similarly, Samuel and Rozario’s study in Bangladesh starts from the material their human research subjects mention and moves towards the discussion of a few of the video creators, like Zakir Naik and Harun Yahya, who are reported to have had a significant impact (Samuel and Rozario 2010). Pedersen (2016) examines one particular video blogger from the United Kingdom in order to examine how she constructs fashion as both a lifestyle and business; her work discusses the same vloggers presented by Wheeler (2014). Wheeler’s study uses the material of only two Western-located female video bloggers, examining 30 videos from each, and then selecting three from each for intensive analysis. This highly focused discussion enables her to dig into how the videos engage the discourses available to them.

One may see that the previous research is in some ways broad and in other ways constrained. Our research is unique for two reasons: (1) we have sought to compile a majority of the videos on a diversely discussed topic, addressing both Islam and science, and (2) we are evaluating the content of the videos and providing those evaluations to the public. Thus one of the fundamental goals of the project rests on our ability to find videos relevant to our topic in a broad spectrum of locations efficiently rather than just YouTube, and compile data to enable us to prioritize the more time-intensive evaluations.

In the next section we will discuss in more detail the discourse of science and Islam that are found in the videos we sought.

Discursive orientation of the project

This project's focus on science and Islam in Internet videos may be seen as a part of a wider discourse on the topic. Science narratives are used in conjunction with religion for a variety of purposes (for a broad overview, see Lindberg and Numbers 1986; Brooke 1991; Dixon, et al. 2010). The reception and reaction to biological evolution is, for example, one of the most common topics discussed in relation to science and religion (for example, Miller 2002; Numbers 2006; Ruse 2006). Science narratives are linked with Islam in narratives that run the spectrum from seeking to prove Islam is true scientifically, through seeking to lampoon individual Muslims' ignorance, to attempting to prove Islam is false using science. For example, for at least fifty years there have been active speakers around the world who seek to read science into and out of the Qur'an, suggesting that "unknowable" information in the text "proves" that it is divine (Bigliardi 2014b; Guessoum 2011), building upon constructions of the Qur'an that have been in use for more than one hundred years (Jansen 1974; Yazioğlu 2013; Elshakry 2013). These narratives frequently involve Western scholars as scientific authorities, who are presented as impartially discussing the scientific facts and typically converting to Islam (Bigliardi 2012). In addition, starting in the 1980s there was also a push for the Islamization of science or knowledge (Stenberg 1996), which suggested that by contextualizing textbooks and information in an Islamic cultural setting, information and science could advance hand-in-hand with Islam.

The critical study of these narratives has been advancing slowly. In part, this is because the social, cultural and historical development of Muslims has an effect on the way debates arise around these issues. Surveys of contemporary landscapes provide introductions to some of the major questions (Guessoum 2011; Edis 2007). The various discourses in the multiple languages and locales of Muslims are influenced by cultural elements like politics, the media, and other local concerns (Clark 2014; Edis 2007;

ElShakry 2013). There are works that look at some of the prominent names in the development of the Islamization of knowledge, as well as interviews of some of the prominent Muslim scientists who discuss these topics (Bigliardi 2011; Bigliardi 2012; Bigliardi 2014a; Stenberg 1996). There have been fewer attempts to study Muslim views of publicly contested ideas like evolution in different geographical locations (Hameed 2008; Everhart and Hameed 2013). Because video engages these discourses both locally and transnationally, they provide insight into questions of the consumption and production of these narrative streams. The intersection of science and Islam is a highly focused lens through which to view this medium and it has enabled us to engage it as has rarely been done before.

The project was initiated in June 2014 and the Science and Islam Video Portal (www.scienceandislamvideos.com) was officially launched in October 2015. The final catalogue contains 1,006 unique videos and to date we have provided evaluations on the Portal for over two hundred videos. The cataloguing project included over a dozen undergraduates from Hampshire College, Mount Holyoke College, and the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, working through the 2014-2015 school year.

Because we were uncertain about what we would find, our questions at the outset were broad: How many videos about Islam and science are there on the Internet? What platforms are they presented on? What roles are curated sites playing in the dissemination of videos? Who makes the videos, and what topics do they address? Which speakers and topics are most popular? To what extent are the videos used to attack Islam or Muslims? To what extent are they used to support particular understandings of Islam that may not be widely held among Muslims as a whole? These questions drove some of our basic methodological choices.

Problems with search strategies in video

Text-based search methodologies on the Internet are fairly well studied (Lewandowski 2015; Thelwall 2015b; Thelwall 2015a). However, video is not text, and comprehensive results are not what most search engines are

designed for. A few works on Internet searching specifically address YouTube or video generally (Bazzell 2014), but as these are general works, there is not a clear discussion of the pitfalls and issues surrounding video searches, which are more dependent on user tagging than text is. Since search algorithms are proprietary, what additional information, if any, they use to supplement user tagging is not publicly available.

Most people are aware of video search by the Google Search Engine, as well as the Advanced Video Search (www.google.com/advanced_video_search), which provides additional search parameters in an easy-to-use format. During July 2015, we ran several practice searches using a variety of search engines and indices to develop best practices for finding videos. The Application Programming Interface (API) for YouTube limited results by using only YouTube data, which we found undesirable. By limiting its search sphere to only videos within YouTube, the API overlooked videos on curated web sites and other hosting sites. We therefore elected to use the Advanced Video Search instead, with results that will be documented in the final section of this article. Other search engines were also tested, but the output format from Google, which was numbered and vertically linear, made it easy to work with as textual output. Additionally, research has shown that Google outperforms other search engines (Lewandowski 2015:1772). After evaluating the test data, we set initial search parameters and created our online video cataloguing tool (using Google Forms).

The test searches also provided us with data through which we confronted assumptions we had been naively making. We realized that we would need to create definitions for the boundaries of search parameters that reached beyond the technical definition of the MP4 file structure that search engines consider a video file. In order to enable others to consider these assumptions for themselves, we include here not only our definitions, but also research considerations that suggest additional possibilities.

The most basic concept that we defined for the project was what we considered a video. Test searches quickly uncovered the wide variety of materials

that fall into this category. Even if we disregarded elements like video quality and display size, as well as issues of length, language and platform, not everything in an MP4 format, currently the most widely used online video format, was what we classified as a video. The MP4 file format is an envelope containing streams of audio and visual material; the two are not necessarily linked in any way. Since our focus was on how people engage with the topic of science and Islam, our definition of a video stated that the file needed to include both moving images and an audio track that corresponds with the moving images, as in a recording of a lecture, or a documentary with voice-over narration. This excludes both podcasts, which have audio (and may have originally been an audio-only format) but unconnected visuals, and moving images with unrelated audio (in our case, most often Qur'anic recitations), where the primary focus is apparently to maintain the visual attention of the viewer. Our definition also excludes files with moving images and no audio component. This definition excluded a substantial subset of our search returns on Islam and science, as they were text cards, similar to a PowerPoint display, with little or no audio. (See Figure 1 for an example, Rodzi 2011:min1:40.) These text-card quasi-videos were sometimes up to 20 percent of search returns. We did not use them, but they may be a fruitful source of material for future research.



Figure 1. Example of a video without moving images. (Rodzi 2011:min1:40)

We also defined our parameters for *Islam* and *science* after examining the test data. We included any videos presenting someone who calls what they practice “Islam”. This included groups like the Ahmadiyya and the Nation of Islam, although the returns for these minorities were small. A Muslim, for the purposes of cataloguing, is anyone who either presents themselves as a Muslim (of whatever subgroup), or might be interpreted as a Muslim by others, whether true or not. Video settings, in religious or secular contexts, was irrelevant. Reference to the Qur’ān was also considered “Islam”. Materials might include positive self identifications as well as pejorative constructions. These references might be implicit or explicit, verbal or visual.

Science, as it was the core of our research project, focused on natural science, such as biology, physics, astronomy, chemistry, and medicine. We included mathematics and geometry, as well as the history of science in our searches. We did not specifically include occult sciences, which historically have been understood by Muslims as being a part of natural science, such as letterism, numeracy, and astrology, fields which have recently been receiving more attention (Bigliardi 2015; Binbaş 2016; Melvin-Koushki 2012; Melvin-Koushki 2017; Rapoport and Savage-Smith 2014; Ryan 2011), but we did not specifically exclude them either. Some topics were searched specifically because we knew them to be sites of contestation or authority in the discourse; not all scientific disciplines are productive in these discourses, so some, such as chemistry, did not figure prominently in our search returns. We included videos presenting scientists (either explicitly or implicitly) even when they were not discussing science, although these are much more difficult to capture through ordinary searches.

Our project was to find all, or as close to all as we could come, of the *unique* videos on Islam and science. With video, Islam and science defined, we found we needed to address what *unique* meant as well. It is rare to find a discussion in new media literature of what constitutes a duplicate video (that is, one that is not unique), but it has significant repercussions when examining videos as a form of discourse, and in particular when discussing how popular they are. Multiple copies of the “same” video are not identical: they link different social networks, they have different comments,

and they may appear in different contexts. We defined copies - that is, the not unique - in three different ways: duplicates, multiples, and segments. A *duplicate* is an exact copy of whatever we had as an original. *Original* for this stage of the research was merely whatever was found first in the search returns, and may or may not have been posted by the person(s) who created it. By definition, duplicates are of exactly the same length, although they may be of different resolutions (the number of pixels composing the image). We did not attempt to determine if these were the same precise digital file. Notably, Google's search results do not always show the same still image (thumbnail) for duplicates. Duplicates were excluded through each of the data cleaning stages discussed below. *Multiples* we defined as near-duplicates, but with some minor differences. These differences may arise from the way a video was clipped from its longer source, or because of the addition or a removal of front or back *bumpers* (identifying sequences of a logo or branding animation). Multiples were not removed in the earliest stages; both duplicates and multiples have informed additional research we have done on videos (discussed below).

Segments are pieces of longer videos. These differed from clips in that they were not typically divided in order to capture particular content from the longer original, but rather in order to upload a longer original to YouTube or another platform when these platforms maintained restrictions on the length of videos. Users maneuvered around limitations that YouTube originally placed on video length (limitations which no longer exist) by cutting videos longer than ten minutes into lengths the platform considered acceptable. In some instances these segments were the only versions that could be found on the Internet, so the segments were catalogued. After cataloguing was completed the segments were gathered and replaced by complete versions where possible. Gathering segments after cataloguing was often difficult, as those who uploaded segments might give them a variety of titles, or only upload particular segments. Therefore pieces needed to be found, compared and identified as belonging together. It is also true that Google's search does not necessarily return all the segments of a video. When we needed to use the segments rather than a single video, a subsequent, more targeted search was done to find all the available segments.

One genre of videos met all the above criteria, but was excluded. This genre was conversion narratives. Text-based conversion narratives have a long history in the Islamic world (Bulliet 1979; Davis and Rambo 2009; Knight 2013; Kondo 2015). One may find them in a variety of contexts. For example, sometimes at the frontiers of Islam one finds narratives of a ruler or a leader converting and bringing with him his entire community (DeWeese 1994). We uncovered a fairly lively genre of conversion videos, where an individual is presented as converting to Islam *because* of science, or the focus is on a scientist who becomes a Muslim. There are also videos of individuals leaving Islam because of science as well. Since the primary truth claim being made - the fact of the individual's conversion to Islam (or in a few instances, out of it) - would require research into those individuals' personal relationship with the faith, we decided this was beyond the scope of the project. Given the prevalence with which these claims are made - discussions of the 'conversion' of Maurice Bucaille (d. 1998), author of *The Bible, The Quran and Science* (1976) and a prominent speaker on Islam and science, or Neil Armstrong, the American astronaut, are just two of the many examples in this genre - this may be another fruitful research venture for those studying the sociology of religion.

We used Google's Advanced Video Search, which generally returns videos in which a key term are found in the title, the video's description, or the comments. It is often the case, particularly as one advances more deeply into the search returns, that it was at times unclear why a video was included in the results at all. Few of the videos we examined had searchable transcripts, a process that Google has recently automated, so typically our search returns are not based on what is said within the videos. It should also be noted that the now-automated transcripts produce poor results for those speaking with unusual accents in English or using unusual vocabulary, such as specialized terms about Islam or Muslims from Arabic. In addition, because we sought to find material on natural science and Islam, the materials needed to mention Islam *or* Muslims *and* science. However, this mention might include a visual reference to Muslims, that is, showing people in stereotypically (Seiter 2017) Islamic clothing, referring to a verse of the Qur'an, or other implicit references.

These were the most difficult videos to find, and it is likely that search failures, material that was never identified, had only such implicit references to science or Islam.

Many discussions of video content about Islam seek to classify them by genre (Al-Rawi 2015b; Welbourne and Grant 2015:6; Mittell 2017). Test coding, however, demonstrated this to be difficult given the blurry boundaries between the genres. Even something as seemingly straight-forward as a *vlog* (video blog) is difficult to identify when it crosses out of the classic form (talking into a computer's video camera) into someone speaking outdoors, or when a professional lecturer mimics the intimacy of an amateur vlogger but with high production values. *Lectures*, a classic academic genre, were difficult to differentiate when recorded from a single, fixed camera. This eliminates visual or auditory cues about audiences; the size and composition of the audience are important elements for a viewer's interpretation of the authority of the speaker. Because the videos we identified were not only reacting to material, but creating original presentations of it, the spectrum of what we encountered seems to be broader than that of other studies. Therefore, we collected data on the number of speakers, audience, visual setting, and so forth. This allows us to examine these constructs independently, without forcing the videos into genre classifications that might not fit their content or our research well.

The cataloguing process, done online by trained undergraduates through a Google Form, collected over forty data elements. Some were basic facts about the video, such as title, length and upload date. We collected data on the site of the presentation, the speaker(s), languages and accents, how the presentation discussed science and Islam, and a long descriptive field in which the cataloguer included what happened on the screen and what was said. Few videos included every data element, as some locations were impossible to determine, for instance, or a clip from a longer video would not identify the speaker. Ideally we would have spent the time to ensure inter- and intra-rater consistency for the data we collected. Because of the project's time constraints, we did not test for coding consistency.

It should be noted that information not collected in this project includes anything related to audiences for the videos. Generally audience data is private, accessible only by a video's uploader or curator. Although viewership networks might be implied by the names of the commenters, there are various methodological issues involved here as well. In short, using publicly viewable videos as a source for discussing viewers is not a sound methodology at this time.

Given these inclusions and exclusions, we now move on to a more detailed discussion of the search process itself.

Searching for Videos

We conducted test searches to confirm appropriate keywords in our videos of interest. Generally, Islam was represented with key terms *Islam*, *Muslim*, *Moslem*, *Quran*, *Koran*. Science key terms included *science*, *astronomy*, *biology*, *medicine*, *mathematics*, *geometry* as well as more specific terms such as *black hole*, *Big Bang*, *expanding universe*, *evolution*, *evolutionist*, *Darwin*, *Darwinism*, *aliens*, *embryology*, *miracles*, *mountains*, *iron*. Very specific search terms, like *embryology*, were used because we know of long-standing debates about these topics in science and Islam discourses. Some terms, like *evolutionist*, came up in early searches and were used to ensure that we compiled exhaustive search returns. Searches were done combining key terms for Islam with one or two key science terms for accuracy.

Searching for materials on natural science was relatively easy, but because of the large number of search terms, generally we searched for materials using the broadest terms (*science*) first, and ran subsequent searches with increasingly specific terms (*evolution*, *Darwinism*, *embryology*). The number of keywords we used appears to be substantially more than most of the prior research, which typically used three words or less. In order to ensure new videos were not missed, we re-ran searches monthly from October 2014 to April 2015. We did not download the videos we identified, which has meant occasionally searching again for videos we discover have been removed from the Internet.

Google's Advanced Video Search works best when it is pushed to be as focused as possible. Google has pre-defined video length categories: short (0-3:59 mins), medium (4-19:59 mins) and long (20+ mins). We adopted these length groupings as well. We typically searched for only one video length at a time, and limited the number of web sites by searching separately for videos found on YouTube and outside YouTube. To make sure everything possible was found, we included a final search that excluded all the major hosting sites (YouTube, Vimeo, DailyMotion, Tune.pk). Thus each key term needed to be searched nine times: once for each video length and platform combination. The final search rarely produced videos that had not been collected in the earlier searches, but was especially useful to ensure we did not miss materials on web sites, including blogs and commercial sites, such as those focused on *1001 Inventions* (al-Hassani 2012). Although we specified English as the target language in the search, in some cases the videos returned were not in English and did not have subtitles and were individually excluded. (See discussion on data cleaning below.)

In the end we know that despite all these efforts, we may have missed additional videos for various reasons. One example of a video we might have missed is worth mentioning. Talk Islam, an Australian group, has a video "The Meaning of Life", which includes both images of videos by Muslim creationists, as well as other discussions of science (Talk Islam 2013; Gardner and Hameed, forthcoming; n.d.). The original version under that title was not found in our searches. One user, who re-uploaded the video onto their own YouTube page renamed it "Islam and science" (Ghori 2014). That version, which had only 21 views as of August 2015, was catalogued. Later research uncovered the original Talk Islam copy, which had nearly two million views, making it one of the more popular videos employing science and Islam narratives. This was a small victory: we were fortunate that someone renamed it. Subsequent searches for "the meaning of life" and Islam have turned up many more similar videos by other creators, which discuss science fairly regularly. These are examples of videos that discuss science and Islam but are not tagged as such or being commented on as such, and are therefore unlikely to be found in direct searches.

A simple Google search on *Islam and science videos* today returns close to 6.25 million hits (8 May 2017 without quotes, or 7,350 with quotes). In our search process, we rarely needed to go beyond the first five or six hundred returns before the returns became irrelevant to the search terms. This is consistent with the way search engines work (Lewandowski 2015:1764), as it is likely that algorithms move further and further from the core of the most relevant returns into additional material from related terms on the assumption that users continuing to page through returns have not yet found what they want. This is why tightly focused searches are important, despite the possibility of missing material.

SEARCHING

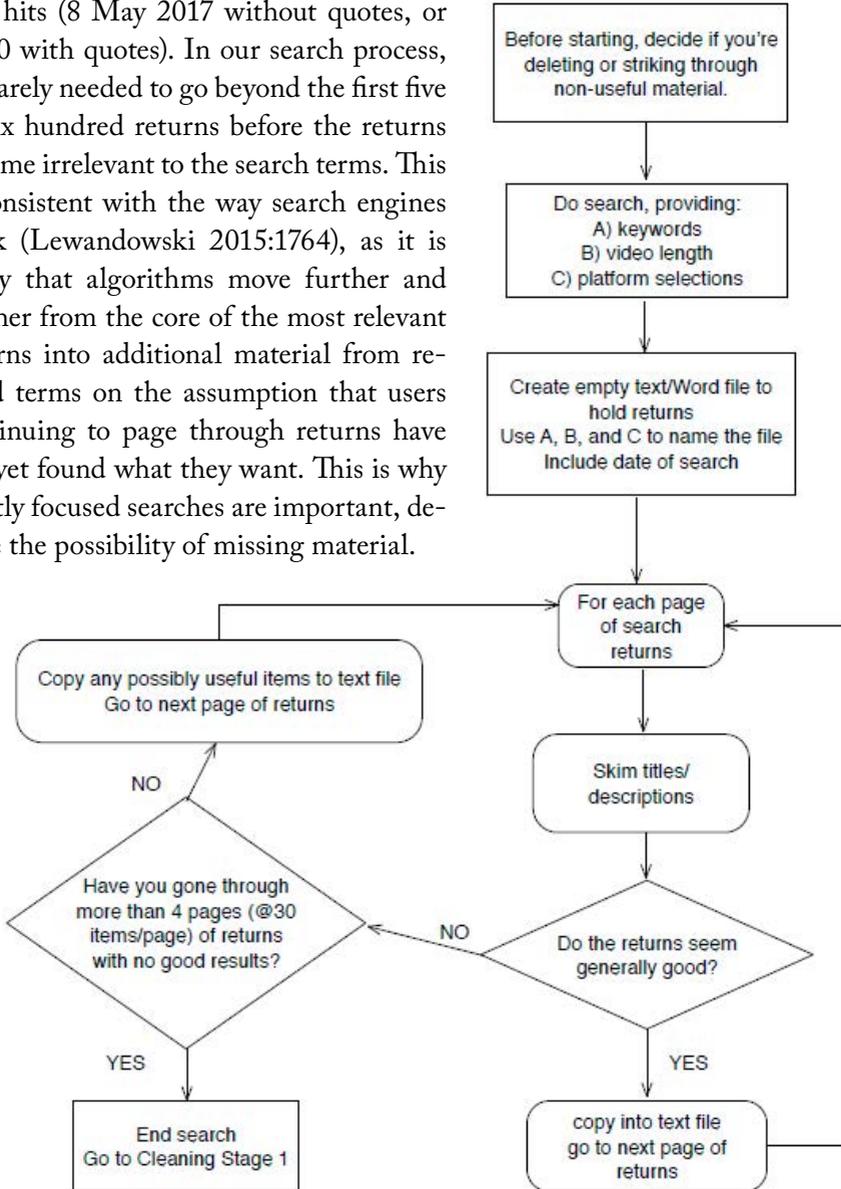


Figure 2. Video Search Flowchart

After acquiring the search returns and placing them in text files, the initial search results required several levels of cleaning. A typical search return goes through the following steps (see Figures 2 and 3): The searcher first checks that the video is active, that the video is in English, and that it is about science and Islam. This quick view through the video also removes conversion narratives and text-card videos. These steps usually take less than 2-3 minutes per video. Despite this, after cataloguing we found that some videos had no science or no Islam/Muslims. This is partly because Google’s algorithm includes *religion* when a user searches for *Islam*, resulting in returns that address other faith systems’ engagement with science. Ensuring that a video includes (or not) even slight or implicit mentions of Islam in its discussion of religion and science requires watching the entire video. Because of this the cataloguers were instructed to catalogue every video they were given, whether it appeared to be about Islam or not, and the elimination of non-Islam videos was done at a later stage.

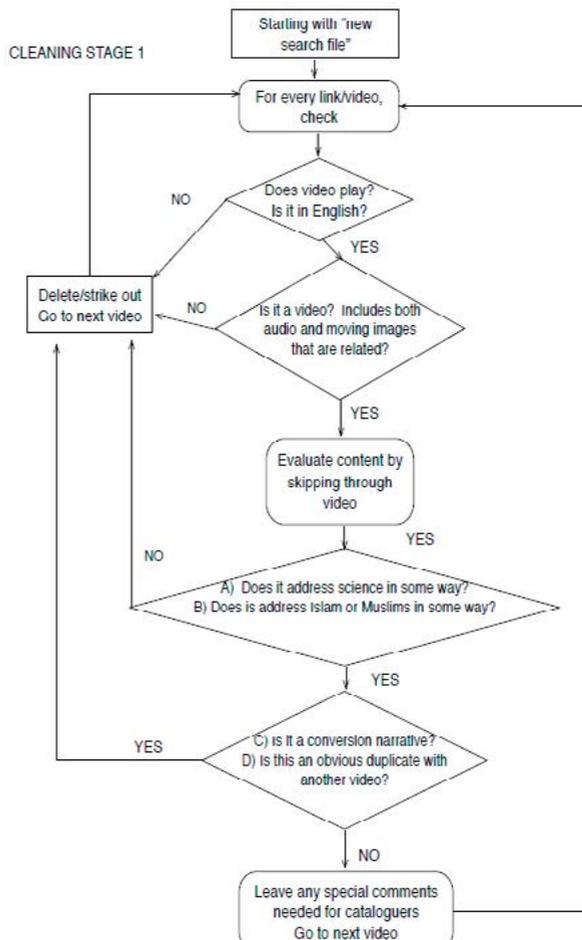


Figure 3. Cleaning Stage 1 Flowchart

A second cleaning pass was done to compare each new search return against videos that had already been identified (See Figure 3). For example, a video found with the key word *science* might also be found with the key word *biology*. We anticipated clips of videos, and believed that clips of the same material but with different lengths (“multiples”, see definitions above) would help us to learn what materials individuals consider important from longer videos. As the searching progressed, we also noticed that various groups or individuals add or remove bumpers, making videos longer or shorter. We elected to catalogue these in order to help identify who engages in the process and how, although the material has not yet been analyzed.

Once all the videos were catalogued, a final level of cleaning of the data was done. (See Figure 4.) This eliminated all the videos coded as being without Islam or without science, after checking through the video descriptions and verifying the coding. Duplicates, unnecessary multiples, and unneeded segments were removed. Careful sorting of the individual videos was done in order to ensure that only one copy (without any multiples or duplicates) of each video was included in the final catalogue.

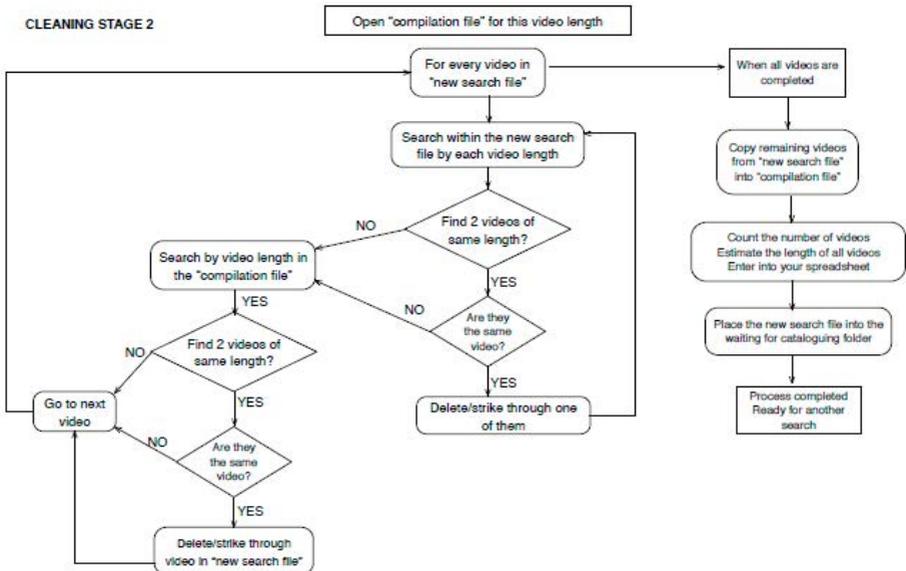


Figure 4. Cleaning Stage 2 Flowchart

The final results people often find surprising: we catalogued 2,282 videos (an estimated 790 hours in length), which resulted in just over a thousand (1,006) videos in the final, cleaned database from which we draw videos for evaluation. These were culled from tens of thousands of Google search results. Although these numbers are not unmanageable, a more narrowly drawn topic would ensure more time to find materials that are not well tagged. It is impossible to know how many of the inadequately tagged or titled videos were not included in the returns.

In order to give a better sense of the range of what we did find, the preliminary results are presented here to provide an overview of this media. More analysis is needed in order to discuss the findings in detail. The number of videos is quite manageable for data analysis. For instance, the primary scientific field (each video may have up to two defined scientific fields in the catalogue) show that the topics of Evolution/Creationism, History of Science, and Medicine combined account for just over half (548/1006) of the videos (Figure 5). Evolution alone has 226 videos, the most numerous scientific field, demonstrating its importance in the discourse by and about Muslims. The variety of scientific fields demonstrates that there is a wealth of material to be analyzed for how it enters discourses about Islam and Muslims.

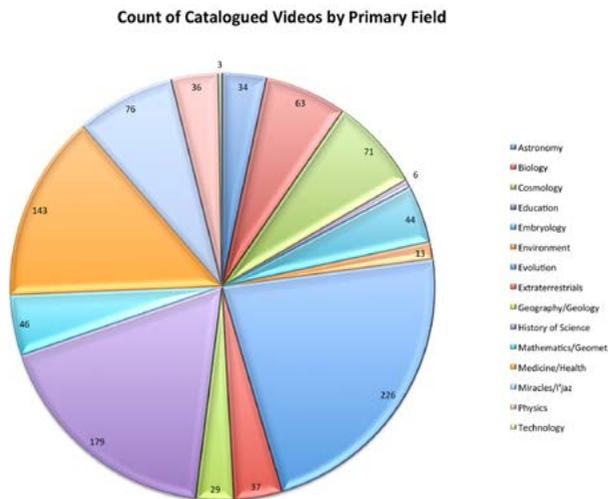


Figure 5. Count of Catalogued Videos by Primary Field

The number of views a video gathers is often used as a simplistic measure of popularity (Clarke 2017), a construct we have questioned with later research (Gardner and Hameed, forthcoming; n.d.). Figure 6 shows the number of videos with particular ranges of views organized by the various scientific fields. Evolution/Creationism shows broad bands of videos with many views, although the History of Science perhaps has the highest percentage of videos with more than five hundred thousand views, which were a rarity in our research. Especially notable are videos on extraterrestrial life, which has a high proportion of substantial view counts, especially given the relative scarcity of the topic. As a caution about this data, however, it should be noted that we did not search each individual title to ensure we included in our database only the most-viewed copy. Although the assumption is often made that Google Search will return the most-viewed copy, this is not accurate.

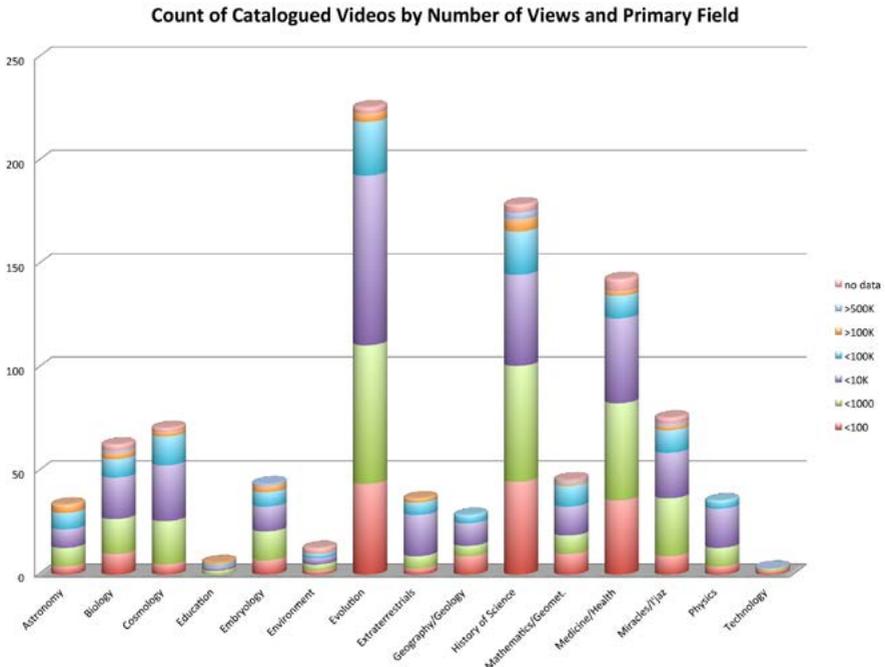


Figure 6. Count of Catalogued Videos by Number of Views and Primary Field (1-99; 100-999; 1000-9,999; 10,000-99,999; 100,000-499,999; more than 500,000, and those with no data)

Figure 7 shows the number of videos with particular settings, which in other research might have been used to describe video genre. The substantial number of videos with seated speakers on a stage or soundstage, an atypical format for lectures and vlogs, is likely the result of the frequent use of this format on PeaceTV and shows such as *The Deen Show* and *Islam and Science* (with Zaghoul El Naggar). The category of computer-generated visuals has shown exponential growth over the past few years, and is increasingly being used in spoof or critique videos, which may either spoof ideas that are suggested to be held by Muslims or ideas that are suggested to be atheist.

Count of Catalogued Videos by Setting of Video

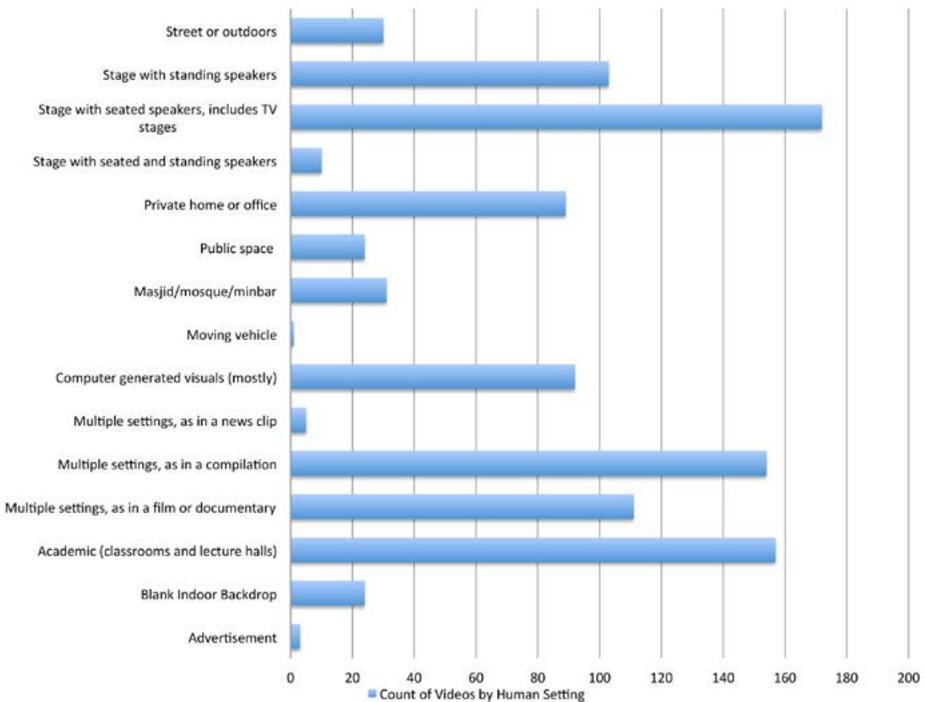


Figure 7. Count of Catalogued Videos by Setting of Video

Table 2 provides a brief summary of the number videos by particular speakers, a category that is complicated to code since not all the video clips identify the speakers, requiring the visual recognition of nearly five hundred individuals who appear in the videos. Seventy-three percent of all videos present at least one named speaker, and of those, 25 percent (184) have additional speakers. The 27 percent without named speakers is high, and may change as additional work is done to identify speakers. Forty-seven percent-nearly half of all the videos with named speakers-are videos from those who have five or more videos in the catalogue. The fifteen speakers with the most unique videos account for nearly a third of all the videos with named speakers, suggesting that these fifteen, which includes several academics, are successfully utilizing videos as a means to distribute their ideas. Foremost among these is Zakir Naik (b. 1965), a Muslim preacher from Mumbai, India, who accounts for 62 videos, far more than any other individual. Naik and his presentations have been a continuing focus for our further research (Gardner, et al. in press; n.d.). Adnan Oktar (b. 1956), a Turkish preacher who is widely known for his creationist stance (Bigliardi 2014a; Samuel and Rozario 2010; Solberg 2013; Hameed 2008; Hameed 2015; Rieuxinger 2002), also known as Harun Yahya, appears in 12 videos. This did not include videos that claim to be based on his ideas, since he does not personally appear in them, although these are also numerous.

| Speaker Summaries | Total count | Percentage of videos with speakers | Percentage of all videos |
|---|-------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Videos with speakers who have >4 videos | 348 | 47.3% | 34.5% |
| Videos of top 15 speakers | 236 | 32.1% | 23.4% |
| Videos with at least one named speaker | 736 | | 72.9% |
| Videos with >1 named speaker | 184 | 25.0% | 18.2% |
| Total number of named speakers | 481 | | |
| Number of speakers with >4 videos | 34 | | |

Table 2. Summary of Counts of Videos by Speaker.

Conclusions

We will conclude this article by discussing some of the findings this methodology suggests about continuing research using Internet videos. Our research demonstrates that collecting and studying videos through ordinary search returns is possible and fruitful. The numbers of returns listed by Google’s search engine are wildly unrealistic and should be ignored. Human-powered data collection, which included far more data than could have been scraped from YouTube alone, took only one academic year, and has provided a wealth of data for future research and analysis.

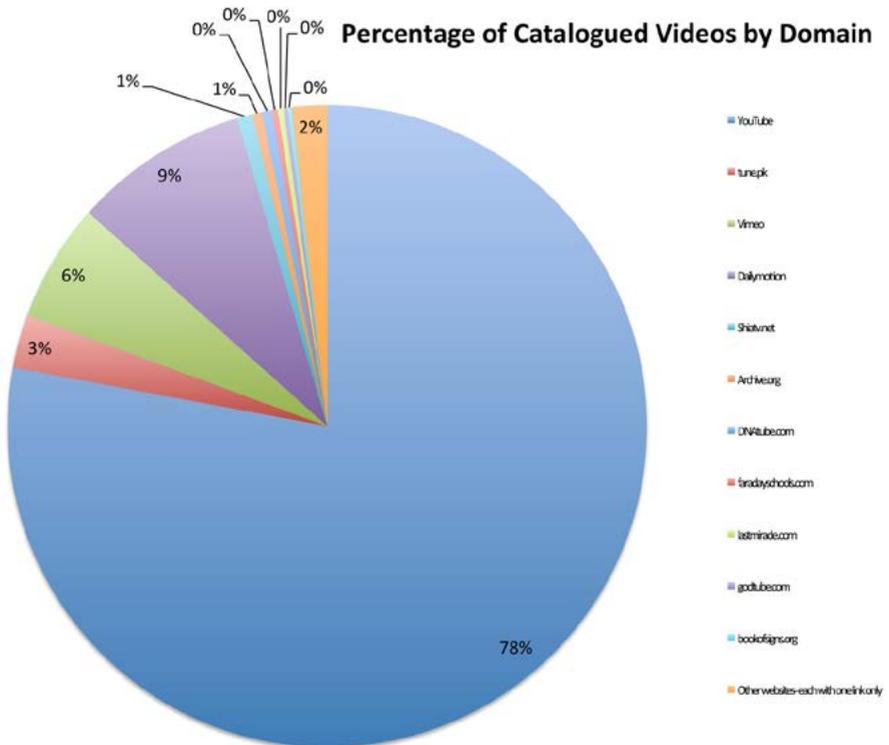


Figure 8. Percentage of Catalogued Videos by Domain

We also note the material outside YouTube, which suggests all the prior research focusing on YouTube alone may be missing important data. The majority of the work on Internet videos is being done using YouTube data. This provides abundant results and ready access to some types of data. It also must be said that if one is interested broadly in the discourse on a topic through video, YouTube's automated removal of both videos and users is pushing some users to other platforms, like Vimeo, which does not have the same sorts of problems, as we have seen when searching for additional copies of videos that have been removed. This automated removal, based on user-reported violations of "community standards", has been documented by our own work, as we revisit our data; YouTube posts a specific message when videos have been removed for this violation. This has been a particular problem for users who create critique or spoof videos, as their work more often receives flags for inappropriate content or use of copyrighted material. Some material on science and Islam is rarely found because its creators rigorously enforce their copyright, such as the *1001 Inventions* organization. We also have been able to find videos from other platforms, like archive.com, which have helped us to go back further in time than YouTube, especially to find complete videos and lectures. Although we ran all the YouTube searches before the non-YouTube searches, nonetheless only 78 percent of our final videos (786/1006) were from YouTube (Figure 8). Research done on YouTube alone is missing that remaining 22 percent, material that does not duplicate the material on YouTube. Particularly when we discuss videos about Islam, the several countries that regularly censor YouTube, perhaps especially Pakistan, with its large English-speaking population, need to be included.

It also seems clear to us from a methodological standpoint that we need to consider the variations of videos -multiples, duplicates and segments -as a part of our data rather than something to screen out. In many instances variations were created by users who altered the original video in some way, such as by adding their own branding in a front or back bumper. This branding information, or the lack of it, is a more important distinction than has been considered in the prior research, which often notes that duplicates were eliminated without detailing how duplicates were defined. When user

networks are studied, these duplicates become still more important, as they extend the reach of the networks through which a particular video communicates, as we will discuss in upcoming articles on Zakir Naik's presentation of evolution. In addition, if we are to speak of the popularity of a video, we must engage with the contact information (views, likes, etc) of *every* copy, since even just the number of copies (and languages into which it is translated) is an indicator of how desirable the video was. As we have demonstrated in our examination of "The Meaning of Life" (Talk Islam 2013; Gardner and Hameed, forthcoming; n.d.), even though a video may start out in English, it does not necessarily stay in that linguistic sphere.

The outcome of this research, in addition to the creation of the Science and Islam Video Portal, has been an increased awareness of the richness of this discourse beyond the celebrity figures, and how readily the discussions move beyond national and linguistic boundaries. For researchers wanting to study the contemporary voices of both ordinary and celebrity Muslims and those debating about Muslims, Internet videos provide a large and relatively untapped source.

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Youth Activism and Social Networks in Egypt

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Abstract:

The arrival of the Internet-based technologies has made the work of professional activists much more effective and has attracted the attention of society and observers, if only because their internal and external communications became much cheaper and harder to be monitored. The new social networking technologies have provided the youth with new channels for participation and empowerment. This became true in a part of the world where the older generations, in either government or opposition, controlled the traditional political and cultural arena and dominated the public sphere. However, the younger generations gradually launched creative initiatives using online media in recent years. The younger generations have engaged in public affairs by peaceful means to bring about a change and to influence the decision-making processes and policies. In this regard, the new social media played a facilitating role in the long wave of continuous politics in Egypt, although it is not a causal role. It basically helped in the mobilization and framing process aiming to delegitimize the regime and demoralize its policies. The ideas and ideologies spread in the public sphere, and, in addition to grievances, enabled the young activists to present new claims and to behave in ways that fundamentally challenged the authorities. Indeed the social media impact could not lead to real change without physical offline action in society. In this respect the most notable actions, such as the April 6 Strike in El Mahala 2008 and January 25 revolution, were triggered by the marriage between online and offline activism, particularly when activists moved smartly between online and offline activities to create real challenges to the regime and to escape from police repression.

Keywords:

activism, Egypt, social media

Introduction

This article examines the development of youth activism in Egypt as key social actors during the latter years of Mubarak's presidency and leading

into the tumultuous events of the Revolution in January 2011 and beyond. In attempting to explain the contemporary re-emergence of youth activism during the January Revolution, the study proceeds to examine the developments that have led to a revolution particularly the new social media influence that created a new dilemma for the authorities that can effectively move against traditional media while finding it difficult to silence the increasing numbers of elusive protest voices playing out on new technologies which spread around the country. It is worth noting that the young generation became the main age group that uses Internet-based technologies. Egyptian youth activists in recent years found new independent sites for their activism in the emerging blogosphere and Facebook which became platforms of political and cultural expression for some, as well as a mode of social and political networking, campaigning and organization for others. It is important to explain the youth activism from the generational perspective and investigate the role played by social media in facilitating mobilization and creating a counter hegemonic discourse.

Mapping youth activism from the generational perspective

The analysis of youth activism showed that the youth activism were part of the same political generation that could be called the “Digital Native” or “Millennium” generation. Mannheim (1974:7-8) identified a political generation as the same age group members who were involved in the two key elements; that all grow in the same historical and cultural context, and feel together in the same social and historical determination. In the Egyptian context, the Millennium generation is composed of the young people who grew up and experienced the historical developments in the period 2000-2011 when their age was between 18-35 years. They represent a political generation by Mannheim concepts, which emphasized that the biological generation has no sense of great political importance without having collective identity. The generation that becomes a political and social phenomenon worthy of study is the generation that consists of individuals in the same age groups who have lived through the same historical experience and share the same hopes and disappointments, and have experienced freedom and opposition to the older generation (Mannheim 1974:8, Willis

1977, Pilcher 1993). Feuer (1969:25) argued that the generational collective identity is formed due to the founder events that consolidate the similar generational awareness and way of life. It is worth noting that Bayat's thesis about youth activism and non-collective actors (Bayat 2009:5) is similar to Mannheim's theory about the political generation. Bayat's contribution tended to focus on culture, norms, uniforms and way of life. The claims of youthfulness remain at the core of youth movement. But the intensity of youth activism depends, first, on the degree of social control imposed on them by the moral and political authorities and, second, on the degree of social cohesion among the young (Bayat 2009:18).

The political generation features different groups of young people who may be conservative on the one hand or liberal on the other, for example. But both belong to the same generation, because both of them constitute different intellectual and social responses to the same exciting historical factors. Each of these two groups represents a specific "generation unit" within the same generation (Mannheim 1974:9-10). In the Egyptian context the generation features different groups such as Nationalists, Islamists, Marxists, Liberals and Independents.

The generational gaps

Much of the new energy in the Egyptian society and politics came from the younger generation, which became the main social agent for change. The generations that controlled and led Egyptian politics for decades, both in government and opposition during Mubarak's reign, became very old and isolated from the social and cultural transformations in the society. There was a chance for a new generation to replace the old elite by being attached to Gamal Mubarak in the Policies Committee but its neoliberal agenda was a major stimulus for the 25th January revolution. On the other hand, the official opposition parties came under the full control of the regime security services. The activists from the Seventies generation, which emerged in the universities in 1970s, launched various political initiatives particularly political parties since the nineties such as Al-Wast, Al Ghad and Al Karamah after an internal generational and organizational split in the MB,

Al-Wafd and Al Tajamu respectively, as well as wide umbrella movements that consisted of independent and cross ideological activists such as the EPCSPI, and Kefaya (Tohami, Generational Mobility 2009).

The “Millennium” or “Digital Native” generation engaged in contentious politics joining these movements and networks in large numbers because of the historical events and political opportunities that occurred in Egypt and the region since 2000. They interacted with the large number of left-wing activists from the Seventies generation who returned to the political arena after nearly a decade of political apathy (Abdalla, 2003). However, a relative decline took place after the end of the wave of political mobility in 2005. The Millennium generation began to form their own organizations benefiting from the experience and tactics learned from the seventies generation.

Numbers of leading figures sought to establish their own initiatives and networks after developing critical positions toward the older generations, accusing them of apathy and inefficacy and compliance with the regime. They launched movements such as Youth for Change, April 6 and the Current (El-Tayyar) party, which could be considered a rupture with the older generation. Other movements featured better relationships between internal generations such as the MB and the ElBaradei campaign. However the April 6 movement is the most independent group among the younger generation initiatives. These young activists called for the 25 January revolution and were the basic backbone of the demonstrations, although the subsequent stages witnessed the participation of other generations.

The internal diversity in the movements and generational mobility provoked debates and discussion about the strategic choices and policies. While some wings in the movements tended to be more conservative, others have more open-minded views and good relations with other groups. This created intense debate and pressure for reform policies, strategies and frames. The airing of this internal debate in cyberspace foretold coming challenges to the movements. In this regard the social media helped to empower the voices of younger generations who tended to criticize many aspects and practices in some movements such as MB’s leaders.

Blogs and Facebook have enabled individuals in the MB to partake in opposition media activism (Exum 2007:1). This is evident in “how younger MB members attempt to adopt this technology to generate the kinds of solidarity, support and attention” they wish to see (Lynch 2007). The pages, profiles and groups of MB members gradually expanded on Facebook which became a public avenue to display internal disputes and controversial issues among MB activists as it appeared on the profiles and pages belonging to the younger and middle-age activists like Haythem Abou-Khaliel (Facebook n.d.). The movement leaders thought they were able to contain the different wings while activists argued that this “may further threaten the authority of more conservative leaders.” Different approaches emerged among MB leaders about how to tackle the issues; while some of them were concerned that the diversity may lead to fractions and splits, others did not agree saying, “youth should be encouraged to use this technology and not be criticized for doing so” (Ajemian 2008). The splits took place around many issues relating to policies, organization and culture. For example, the ex-Muslim Brother activist Abdel-Monem Mahmoud levelled a series of critiques of the conservative aspects of the published draft of the MB’s programme as a political party in 2007 before splitting (Ajemian 2008). At the same time, Facebook and Twitter became a public avenue to display internal disputes and controversial issues among the MB’s younger generation. Facebook pages also illustrated the escalation of the dispute among the young activists of the Muslim Brotherhood themselves. They debated about the decision to participate in the 2010 election and how it has been taken, as some former members raised charges on the incidence of counterfeiting in the decision of the Shura Council, whose members agreed to participate by 98 percent. The debate had shifted between the activists, from participating in the election decision itself, to a broader discussion about the process of decision-making in the Brotherhood and the role of youth. These disputes escalated and led to significant splits in 2011 when hundreds of activists formed the Egyptian Current (El-Tayyar) party whose leaders were prominent figures in the MB student wing in the universities.

It noteworthy that the new activism was characterized by a set of features that ranged from consuming products of globalization and adopting a kind

of hybrid culture and values balancing between particularity and universality, in addition to the lack of centrality and hierarchy that shaped their new networks and mobilizing structures. The young activists were driven by unlimited aspirations and ambitions so that they went to the extreme demands during the revolution while the older generations were hesitating and sought a compromise with the regime. They followed radical strategies and became less conciliatory in their approach to the regime, favouring comprehensive political change (Tohami 2011).

The cultural and collective identity of the Millennium generation is a hybrid culture; a combination of global and local components, modern and traditional values. Large segments of the young activists moved beyond the divided ideologies to adopt and construct an open political value system, which could be described as the “postmodernism generation”. Perhaps the model of the young man, Wael Ghoneim, the founder of the page “Kolna Khalid Saeed”, who works at Google, is an indication of this case. He graduated from Cairo University, and received his MBA from the American University in Cairo. Although he is not a partisan, he engaged in the protestation against the regime through social networking technologies.

The young generation of activists exerted pressure on the regime to undertake sustained social and political reforms. This has been done through non-violent direct action, such as sit-ins, marches, rallies, constructing barricades, blocking traffic, etcetera (Tarrow 2011:95). The disruption was the main strategy among the radical new activism who “adapted non-violence ideas to favour a type of indigenous political reform marked by a blend of democratic ideals and, possibly, religious sensibilities” (Bayat 2009:13). The nonviolent movements are considered the dictators’ worst nightmare. The social movements in the Egyptian context presented themselves as non-violent peaceful movements that did not resort to vandalism. They took the advantage of the global experience and avoided the risk of a bloody clash with security as happened with other Islamist groups. The anti-terrorist ideology became effective among the young generations of activists as a result of the militant Islamist’s failure in the 1990s who began seeking after nonviolence strategies. It should be taken into account that the violence

that occurred in specific events was in response to police violence like that which happened in the Al-Mahalla city on April 6 (Siam 2010:71).

The impact of globalization and Internet-based communications

The global economic change, developments in media and communications technologies, and the growth of transnational networks contributed to reshaping the opportunities and constraints facing social and youth movements. Some forms of authoritarianism, such as totalitarianism and bureaucratic authoritarianism, have become more difficult to sustain. Although several new (or partially new) nondemocratic regime types took on greater importance in the 1990s, including competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way 2002:63), globalization and new media contributed to the democratization in Middle East countries. In this regard the new transnational types of political, economic, social and cultural actors and processes resulting from globalization led to a global redistribution of power (Pratt 2004:314). Henry and Springborg argued that the way globalization impacts on political regimes in the Middle East depends on the regime type which range between three major types: praetorian republics, monarchies, and, lastly, democracies of varying degrees of institutionalized competitiveness. They classified¹ the Egyptian regime under Mubarak as a praetorian republic ruled by “bullies” as there were some elements of both civil society and rational-legal legitimacy, which in turn reduce, but do not altogether eliminate, the importance of violence and coercion in political life. The structural power of capital, although negligible in praetorian republics governed by bullies, is noticeably greater than in bunker states, where security of property is insufficient to permit capital accumulation. Consequently the “bully” responses to economic globalization are less brutal than those of the bunker states. The limited capacities of the “bully” states, however and the structural weakness of capital within them have severely constrained their efforts to globalize (Henry and Springborg 2010:63).

In addition to this, globalization strengthens “national/regional/political or other identities by bringing people together across time and space” (Yamani 2001). The process of globalization has facilitated intercultural exchanges

which enable new combinations of identities to be created, resulting in a hybrid culture (Nederveen Pieterse 1995). In some cases, these new identities can become a resource for the creation of transnational social movements or a movement for “globalization-from-below” (Keck and Sikkink 1998, Falk 1999, Al-Ali 2001, Pratt 2004:315-316). The blurring of hegemonic national cultures that represent the national community as homogeneous, may empower previously suppressed or ignored social groups, based on class, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexuality or other identities (Held and McGrew 2000, Al-Ali 2001, Pratt 2004:315-316).

In this regard, state autonomy is challenged from below by NGOs and other non-state actors. NGOs for example, “have been encouraged into this role by the increasing amount of aid channelled to them by Northern donors over the last decade.” (Fowler 1992, Pratt 2004). The interdependence relationship between the Egyptian NGO campaign for democratization and transnational NGOs emerged as the former not only mobilized local support, but it also had the backing of international human rights, NGOs and many foreign governments and donors (Pratt 2004:330).

The growing international civil society contributes to the creating of the opportunity for the emergence and extension of social movements. It is widely agreed that the role of transnational social movements and civil society organizations gradually expanded and surged with the globalization and the Iraqi war in 2003. Various groups from civil society and NGOs from different ideological trends have strong ties with the civil society in the western countries. Abdel Rahman (2009:40) argued that “the success of the worldwide anti-war movement has given support to the nascent Egyptian movement whose members are closely linked with this global umbrella”. In response to this challenge the regime advocated executive supervision of fund-raising abroad and attempted to delegitimize transnational linkages by representing ‘foreign funding’ as a threat to the nation (Pratt 2004:326-327).

In addition to this, globalization plays a role in democratization through the extension of new information and communication technologies (ICTs), which provide activists with new ways to challenge the authorities.

The Internet-based communications helped social movements to establish “counter-public spheres” (derived from Habermas’s “public spheres”), whereby this technology provides protesting and marginalized groups with a new and inexpensive means to establish a sphere of media discourse that accompanies their forms of organization and protest (Downey and Fenton 2003:185-202). These groups and individuals developed the use of such technology to become significant channels for voices, minority viewpoints, and political mobilization, and challenge the elite control of public sphere and mass communication. The online media, under a variety of regimes, has significantly contributed to expanding the scope of freedom of expression and to breaking official organizations’ monopoly of channels of communication (UNDP 2010:114). Increasingly, these developments comprise an emerging networked public sphere, in which the power of elites to control the public agenda and bracket the range of allowable opinions is seriously challenged (Etling et al. 2009:7).

The benefits of media convergence, bringing together print, video and broadcast in cyberspace, best explain how sub-state groups can circumvent their marginalization in mainstream media outlets. Ajemian argues that intersecting and complementing existing transnational media would allow for dissident groups and their sympathizers to tap into the mainstream. In addition to this, online media best demonstrate how media convergence empowers individuals to shape media counter-public spheres (Ajemian 2008). Morozov (2009) discussed the change of the meaning of activism; he argued that “anyone can be one of the activists joining a Facebook group, posting to a blog, or setting up a Twitter account would count as activism.”

Despite the historical control over the media, through many entities such as the Egyptian Supreme Press Council, which has been enhanced by the renewal of the state emergency law, the economic and political reform plans and the modernizing process since the mid-nineties, convinced the regime to consider the availability of information and knowledge one of its priorities, programmes that provide labour market information and employment services began emerging on the Internet especially on the

websites of the National Council for Youth and the Ministry of Manpower and Migration (Tohami 2009:23).

These developments led to a revolution in the use of the Internet and new social networking technologies and created a new dilemma for the authorities that were able to effectively move against the traditional media while finding it difficult to silence the increasing numbers of elusive protest voices playing out on new technologies which spread around the country. For example, the circulation for newspapers and magazines is just one million a day. But there are 60 million cell phones that can send a SMS. To the government this can be a dangerous issue that needs to be under control (Flieshman and Hassan 2010). The infrastructure of digital networks is beyond the reach of the state. The government can easily cut power off to television stations or restrict the supply of newsprint, but cannot easily control digital networks when the servers that host political conversations are located overseas, and the Internet service providers and mobile phone operators are privately held businesses (Howard 2010). These days, regimes cannot ban ideas and political debates; they just drive them on to the Internet (O'Donnell 2010).

It is worth noting that the youth are the main group who use Internet-based technologies. Indeed, the growing numbers of educated young people looking for new chances has become the age group benefiting the most from these transformations. They constitute the largest number of current Internet users and have developed channels for alternative means of engagement. According to population estimates prepared by the Central Agency for Public Mobilisation and Statistics (CAPMAS 2008) the youth population between 15-35 years old is about 23 million out of the total population of 76 million in 2006 (30 percent). And the youth represent the biggest category using the Internet as a source of information because it is one of the cheapest and fastest tools at hand.

The youth culture enjoys a visible presence and certain acknowledgement from society and media that was unseen in the 1980s or 1990s. Egyptian youth activists in recent years found new independent sites for their activism

in the emerging blogosphere and Facebook which became platforms of political and cultural expression for some, as well as a mode of social and political networking, campaigning and organization for others. Blogging remained a platform for cultural expression and networking (Tohami 2009:12-13).

The statistics about Internet-based technologies usage illustrate that that Egypt ranked 13th among countries using Facebook, with 28 million users and lead Arab countries in user count, representing almost 30 percent of Arab total users. In 2015, around 31 percent of the Egyptian population used Facebook. The number of users rose significantly in the past five years. In July 2010, there were 3.79 million and jumped to 8.18 million in same month in 2011. By July 2012, there were 11.38 million Facebook users and increased almost five million in July 2013 to reach a total of 16 million. The most notable year-on-year increase however was between July 2013 and July 2014 with the user figures jumping by 6.4 million to reach 22.4 million users.

A more recent report details Internet and social media use among Egyptians shows that Sixty five percent of the users are male while the remaining 35 percent are female. Around 17 percent of users were between 13 and 17 years of age. Users between 18 and 34 years of age dominated this age-group category with 65 percent. The age range of 35 and 44 years of age represented 11 percent of the users while the remaining 7 percent was for those ages 45 and above (Daily News 2016).

Online activists and bloggers, as well as participators in Facebook and YouTube were behind the political action in Egypt. The UN Human Development Report confirmed that “the extent of success of the so-called ‘electronic democracy’ rests largely on young people” (UNDP 2010:113). The importance of the Internet lies in the fact that it may be the only online means available for measuring youth’s political participation. And it has become a tool with huge weight in calling for any activity, as the events of 6th April 2008 demonstrated (UNDP 2010:114).

The number of daily Internet users in Egypt is much higher than that of newspaper readers. These figures are expected to rise to cover more than 50 percent

of Egypt's population in the next ten years (EHDR 2010:114). Consequently, the protesting youth found it to be the best arena to publish and mobilize through composing groups or through personal profiles (Shorouk 2010). We should take into account how young people deal with these new technologies as a new avenue to achieve their goals and dreams and how this reflects on the public sphere or otherwise. The World Development Report (World Bank 2006) shows a higher prevalence of computer use in Egypt. The young people have access to the Internet through cyber cafes that are in Cairo and other urban centres. But technology use among youth is limited to chatting, downloading songs, and access to religious sites (Assaad and Barsoum 2007:15, Tohami 2009:13).

For as much as these developments are significant and worth noting, the percentage of active youth is not representative of the majority. It is striking that the youth who are interested in political and cultural activities is considered a minority among the younger generation and the number who are practising as members of social movements is small, although they have a great influence on political and social issues (Elting et. al. 2009:10). In relating the political and cultural impacts, it is obvious that this minority of activists has an incredible effect on the public sphere and represent a big challenge to the hegemonic discourse of the regime.

The political generational approach used in this study focuses on the youth activism empowered by the social media to oppose the ruling elite. The Millennium generation is a hybrid culture with a range of views all responding to the same set of changes. It includes different ideological and political affiliation, which leads to disputes among them as what happened during the July 3 coup, but they learned to work together in specific events and issues to create change and challenge the regime discourse.

The different roles of social media

The arrival of the Internet-based technologies has made the work of professional activists much more effective and has attracted the attention of society and observers, if only because their internal and external communications

became much cheaper and harder to be monitored. The new social networking technologies have provided the youth with new channels for participation and empowerment. This became true in a part of the world where the older generations, in either government or opposition, controlled the traditional political and cultural arena and dominated the public sphere. However, the younger generations gradually launched creative initiatives using online media in recent years until the 25 January revolution. The younger generations have engaged in public affairs by peaceful means to bring about a change and to influence the decision-making processes and policies.

In this regard, the new social media played a facilitating role in the long wave of continuous politics in Egypt since 2003, although it is not a causal role. It basically helped in the mobilization and framing process aiming to delegitimize the regime and demoralize its policies. The ideas and ideologies spread in the public sphere, and, in addition to grievances, enabled the young activists to present new claims and to behave in ways that fundamentally challenged the authorities. Indeed the social media impact could not lead to real change without physical offline action in society. In this respect the most notable actions, such as the April 6 Strike in El Mahala 2008 and January 25 revolution, were triggered by the marriage between online and offline activism, particularly when activists moved smartly between online and offline activities to create real challenges to the regime and to escape from police repression.

The social media empowered ordinary young people and impacted on the policy agenda as well. The activists launched social media campaigns to support or halt policies and actions both in internal and external issues and which resulted in increasing the role of the public space and public opinion in foreign policy. The Egyptian youth activists succeeded in attracting international attention and the building of a positive image, which shaped the international community's policies toward the Egyptian revolution.

The activists have made extensive use of information technology as a mobilizing instrument. Through their websites, blogs and social networking sites

such as Facebook and Twitter, youth has been able to coordinate various protest activities, even in the absence of organized political structures. The April 6 Strike and January 25 uprising were both wholly a product of the marriage of virtual and real activism. Taking into account that the regime had a high capacity to weaken and abort the forming of central hierarchical organizations, the new activism began using the social media to organize the demonstrations and launch digital campaigns calling for reform or change. The social media served as mobilizing vehicles and channels that connected and coordinated the activities of youth networks and groups, which were not hierarchical, but rather network-based. It could be argued that the activists used social media for a number of purposes: to plan mobilization, to create frames, and to share tips about protests, among other things. But social media's intersection with mobilization shifted in Egypt during the uprising. The social media main roles included providing an organizational infrastructure, as a form of alternative press, and as generating awareness both domestically and internationally of the ongoing revolution. The social media and the Internet were able to foster the necessary requirements for collective action. However, despite its success in organizing the uprisings, it would seem from the current situation in Egypt that social media has been less useful in translating the needs and demands of protesters into political reality (Storck 2011:41).

This shifting role went through at least three distinct stages. In the first stage, spanning roughly from mid-December 2010 to January 27, the "We Are All Khaled Said" Facebook page played an important role in the initial mobilization of the revolution. In the second stage, spanning from January 28 to February 1, 2011, the Social Media Blackout had the opposite effect on mobilization than the one intended by the government. One significant consequence of the blackout was that many people went into the streets to check things out, and ended up participating in the uprising. In the third stage, February 2 to February 11, 2011, after social media was restored in Egypt, there was what I describe as the iconization of Tahrir Square, which drew global attention to that space (Said 2017).

Expanding counter-hegemonic discourse

The value of Internet-based communications and new media is not only because they can easily communicate and mobilize widely with one another, but also because it allows and facilitates the creation of a counter-public sphere of discourse that has the potential to penetrate the society (Ajeman 2008). They facilitated the creation of a counter-hegemonic narrative that challenged the regime. The human rights issues and the abuse of power were always a remarkable issue in the process of demoralizing the regime policies. This represented a major challenge to the regime, which was considered a classic hierarchy, attempting to maintain control of a large public sphere.

In this regard youth activism's influence was growing in its online presence. They were far more prominent and active than the National Democratic Party (NDP). Howard argued that, "If the election were held online, Egypt's ruling elites would be tossed out of power. The tide of opinion among Egyptians online has become a flood of support for opposition movements" (O'Donnell 2010).

Constructing alternative awareness and incubator of democratic

The new social media presented the possibility of a much richer public sphere than existed before. The Internet has become the primary incubator of democratic political conversation. The social movements have moved online, using the information infrastructure of digital media as the place for difficult political conversations. The main opponent to the regime was a complex, fractured umbrella group. They composed of tech-savvy activists and wired civic groups which may not be enough to hold it together much longer (Howard 2010). The slogan "People Want the Fall of the Regime," which insurgents raised, was not only a rebel sign against the control of the older generation that had been in power for decades, but also it could be understood as a guide for this generation to build a new world - freedom, justice, dignity - fit perceptions for this generation formed in the light of the era of globalization.

It is important to consider the remarkable competition between activists and regimes, where each part pushed to come up with new tools: the authorities - with new tools to censor, and the activists - with new tools to unblock the censored materials. The regime realized the risks of leaving the arena of public sphere and developed new tactics to halt the strategy of new activism and then the social media turned out to be a battlefield. This also included the more the established organized groups, which have sought to take part in the Internet arena after recognizing the benefits and risks of ignoring such an arena but without having much influence.

At the same time, it is equally important to evaluate the discussion concerns the intersection of social media and mobilization in Egypt. Scholars and observers agree that social media was crucial in the events of the Egyptian revolution and the Arab spring at large. However, the impact of social media on youth activism became a controversial issue that led to debates about how networks both online and offline, contributed to the ousting of former president Mubarak. The role of youth activists and their strategy that for a long time was considered irrelevant or far from a strong influence on the political structure, proved to be effective in stirring the crowd and making a change through non-central virtual and practical frameworks and networks with a determination to pay the cost of change.

One could reject the false tension between describing the Egyptian uprising as either a “people’s revolution” or as “Facebook” Or “Twitter Revolution,” because ultimately “people” are the agents operating social media. Social media may be a site of contestation, but we should think of it as both a space and technology (Lim 2012:232-234). It is important to reject the techno-deterministic account that studies social media in a social vacuum. The real question is not whether or not social media was a (or the) decisive factor in the Arab spring, but in what ways online activism intersected with offline activism, as well as why the interaction between the two changed from time to time, within the same context. Rather than merely analyze the advantages and limitations of social media use, we should focus on the dynamics and processes of how social media intersects with mobilization, and the temporal shifts of this intersection (Said 2017).

Some reductionist views produced by the academic and media were spread about the role of social media. Rosenberg argued that ‘what worked so smoothly online proved much more difficult on the street’ (Rosenberg 2011). It was easy for the police to block the protests and prevent activists from interacting with ordinary people. It is extremely difficult to draw a clear line between online and offline mobilization, especially in an authoritarian context, where many developments that appear to happen online are in fact the outcome of organizations behind the scenes.

In this respect, some activists began to realize the limits of social networking as a tool of democratic revolution. Facebook could bring together tens of thousands of sympathizers online, but it couldn’t organize them once they logged off. It was a useful communication tool to call people to; well, to what?

Rosenberg’s argument assumed that Facebook was the main reason behind the success of the first 6 April strike, notwithstanding that there were many factors that worked together to bring such success, as has been discussed previously. However, the activists realized that they faced great challenges and dilemmas that needed a new more complicated approach. It was not a matter of calling for demonstrations or strikes on Facebook, but what was extremely important was how to implement on the ground through the cadres and activists who think and plan for it. It is important to distinguish between the social media used by well-educated middle and upper class activists to spread democratic values and the street activism from middle and lower classes who did not regularly log on to Facebook or Twitter.

A new phase of decline

Youth activism expressed the overwhelming feelings and ambitions of young people to participate, keen to practice in the political and public arena during that romantic period when youth activists were considered to be the heroes of the revolution. It could be argue that a combination of youth, labour, students, political parties and Islamists acted together in order to overthrow Mubarak and his inner circle, which finally occurred on

25 January 2011. However, after the revolution, all was far from harmonious. The dilemma is that “nothing guarantees that a just social order will result from a revolutionary change” (Bayat 2009:2). After 25 January, youth activists sought to demolish SCAF rule, which they considered a continuation of the old regime. On the other hand, the election strategy, which was part of the façade corporatist arrangements during Mubarak’s era, began to work in favour of the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi parties. Moreover, the Muslim Brotherhood benefited from the confrontation between youth activists and the SCAF, as it weakened both of them and helped the Brotherhood to win the presidential election and overthrow SCAF in July 2012. Large group of the activists launched the Tamroud campaign, which strongly supported the military’s toppling of president Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood on 3 July 2013, but it began to decline after the coup (*Al-Masry Al-Youm* 2013).

Egypt’s political scene has changed radically from the vigorous pluralism that followed the 2011 uprising. In 2014-17, the Islamist and secular youth groups were excluded or marginalized. Many prominent youth or revolutionary leaders are in prison or exile. The political elite associated with the military or with the former regime of Hosni Mubarak has retaken centre stage (Dunne 2015).

There are many parallels between the current political scene and the one that prevailed in late 2010, when elections that excluded most opposition - and yet were still corrupt and violent - contributed to growing public disgust with the Mubarak regime. Islamist and secular opposition forces have mostly been silenced or marginalized due to the banning of several groups, a harsh law against street protests, an electoral law that disadvantages political parties, and other measures that have undercut media and civil society. It is worth noting that after the counter-revolutionary succeeded, social media became less effective in mobilization. This was due to many reasons, including the military regime’s targeting activists in social media and streets alike. The authority invested heavily in surveillance of social media, and hired an electronic army of paid informants and pro-regime actors to spread rumors and delegitimize activism and the revolutions communications (Said 2017,

Earl et al. 2016). In light of these complications, it is extremely difficult to cannot predict the ways social media would intersect with mobilization in the future in Egypt or other Arab Spring countries. It may well continue to play a role, but we cannot predict any specific type of configurations of this role (Said 2017, Earl et al. 2016).

Certainly the counter-revolution remains adamant in its determination to regain the state apparatus, monopolize the media, restrain civil society, and re-establish repressive rule, perhaps more stubborn than its pre-2011 version. But this new regime has to govern a citizenry that has been significantly transformed. Large segments of the urban and rural poor, industrial labour, an impoverished middle class, marginalized youth and women, have experienced, however briefly, rare moments of feeling free, engaged in unfettered spaces of self-realization, local self-rule and collective efferescence. As a consequence, some of the most entrenched hierarchies were challenged (Bayat 2015).

Conclusion

In sum, the Egyptian youth activism could be seen as the cohering of a generation before and during the first waves of revolution. The youth activism transformed from activism in the old-style social movements to activism via a specifically Egyptian form of New Social Movements which were ultimately horizontal networks using social media as a tool for mobilization and challenging the regime hegemony. They adopted a nonviolent strategy to bring change but subsequently were unable to translate this revolution into post-revolutionary structural power.

The study demonstrates that these youth activism are better understood as New Social Movements (NSM) rather than conventional social movements. They have developed through horizontal networking rather than vertical and hierarchical organisations. They have drawn substantially on the political opportunities offered by transnational and external factors. In both these aspects, they have made good use of new informational and communications technologies, specifically the Internet, which create com-

municative linkages but do not offer a clear route to the next stage of formal political organisation (explaining in part the limitations of these movements). Finally, they demonstrate the importance of generational politics in Egypt, the grievances of which lie at the core of the rupture between state and society.

The study suggests that Egyptian youth activism could be considered as New Social Movements and not only an old style of Social Movements or Social Movements Organizations. The new activism could be identified as; firstly, adopting a kind of mobilizing structure that is horizontal and networked, secondly, being less ideologically partisan enabled them to form across ideological networks and movements, and, thirdly, value-oriented movements that focus on freedom, dignity and social justice. The youth activism was not hierarchical, but rather network-based which used social networking technology as a mobilizing tool. They are not vertically organized such as the MB that could be considered to be of the old style social movements. However, large segments of the youth activism are not typical NSM by Western criteria and terms because they are not post-material, nor post-industrial movements and still focus on power struggles, political issues and radical change of an authoritarian regime. Moreover, variables have started to occur that emphasize the importance of both the generational effect and social media roles. They need to be integrated in the analysis to offer a new synthesis about the youth activism and to fill the gaps in the literature and theory. Youth activism as part of contentious politics would not have prevailed without the new social media, which played a major role in the mobilization and framing processes. The most important thing about these movements was that they were part of a wider generation of young people. The generational peculiarity and gaps should be taken into account when exploring the common features and collective identity of these youth activism.

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Notes

¹They considered that Egypt, Tunisia, and prospective Palestine comprise the “bully” states of the MENA, while Algeria, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen are the bunker states.

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