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“The Best Damn Representation of Islam:” Muslims, Gender, Social Media, and Islamophobia in the United States

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Abstract:

Islamophobia reached new heights during the 2016 United States presidential election. We applied the theory of intersectionality to 15 in-depth focus group interviews conducted in gender-separated groups with 61 Muslim participants (41 women, 20 men) in South East Michigan between October 2016 and April 2017 to understand the role of gender in their responses regarding Islamophobia during the 2016 United States presidential election and Trump's first hundred days in office as president. Both, Muslim women and Muslim men, labored to educate others about Islam online, but Muslim women emphasized their efforts to act as exemplars online of what it means to be Muslim in America more frequently and more strongly than men. Muslim women and men often used ignoring and contextualization as coping mechanisms as the number of Islamophobic messages online was perceived as overwhelming. The high amount and ubiquity of Islamophobic messages online has lead to a sense of futility and high levels of stress among young Muslims in South East Michigan, particularly for Muslim women.

Keywords:

election, Islamophobia, USA, gender, Islam, social media

Introduction

Islamophobia has a long history in the United States (Cainkar 2009) reaching new heights during the 2016 United States presidential election. In addition to rhetoric singling out and attacking Muslims during his campaign, after seven days in office, newly elected Republican president Donald Trump signed an executive order banning travel from seven countries

with predominately Muslim populations (Stack 2017). Among all religious groups in the United States, Americans consistently have ranked Muslims as the most negative (Pew Research Center 2017). American students have been emboldened to make slurs toward Muslims and immigrants; these groups have expressed fears about what could happen to them during Trump's presidency (Costello 2016). Indeed, in the ten days following the United States 2016 election, the Southern Poverty Law Center (2016) logged almost 900 incidents of harassment, many invoking Trump's name; of those, six percent were specifically anti-Muslim.

Muslims in the United States only comprise one percent (3.35 million people) of the United States population (Pew Research Center 2017), but they are frequent targets of discrimination related to Islamophobia. Islamophobia is defined as "indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslims," including "aversion, jealousy, suspicion, disdain, anxiety, rejection, contempt, fear, disgust, anger, and hostility" (Bleich 2012:182). The enactment of Islamophobia aims to maintain existing resource disparities between Muslims and non-Muslims through acts of oppression and violence (Center for Race and Gender 2018). Forty-two percent of Muslim men and 55 percent of Muslim women said they were discriminated against at least once over the past year due to their religious affiliation - with incidents more frequently reported by Muslims who disclosed looking distinctly Muslim in dress, speech, or physical appearance (Pew Research Center 2017), especially via veiling (Droogsma 2007; Kavakci 2004).

Social media has become a new discursive arena, with 88 percent of 18 to 29-year-olds in the United States managing at least one social media account (Pew Research Center 2018). Meanwhile, 35 percent of the United States Muslims population is between the ages of 18 and 29 (Pew Research Center 2017). Their cultural socialization includes both, adopting social media and experiencing discrimination online as Muslims. This cyber Islamophobia includes speech acts that convey an irrational fear of Islam in online spaces (Aguilera-Carnerero and Azeez 2016).

We applied these concepts in our analysis of 15 focus groups with 61 Muslim women and men, centered around how Muslim women and men in the United States experience and respond to Islamophobia online. Our study asked the following questions: What impact does Islamophobia online have on Muslim women and Muslim men? How does gender intersect with the Muslim identity in the United States to position Muslim women and men to respond to Islamophobia?

Focus group discussions revealed Muslim women's and men's desire to educate others about Islam through social media and coping techniques such as contextualization and ignoring when confronted with Islamophobia. Particularly women stressed their online efforts to be good exemplars or ideal models, of Islam.

Theory

We analyzed Islamophobia as a gendered discourse as the theory of intersectionality demonstrates that interwoven aspects of humanity such as race, class, and gender have to be examined together to understand the experiences of people who have been subordinated (Crenshaw 1989). Gender is always constructed in conjunction with other aspects of identity, rendering intersectional experience “greater than the sum of racism and sexism” (Crenshaw 1989:141). We suggest that the construction of gender in conjunction with religious identity is an adequate lens to analyze Muslim women' and men's experiences of Islamophobia. For instance, in a 2017 representative survey, more Muslim women (83 percent) than men (68 percent) in the United States said there is “a lot of discrimination” against Muslims in the United States (Pew Research Center 2017).

Additionally, intersectionality emphasizes differences among women and among men (Crenshaw 1989), situating individuals in their specific location within their larger “groups” of “women” and “men” and revealing the construction of “good”-“bad.” Further, it illuminates how experiences differ depending on visible markers to express one's identity that can be constructed as Muslim or non-Muslim, such as the hijab. In sum, Muslims

in the United States experience their environments based on identifying with their religion and in a combination of that religious affiliation intersecting with gender.

Literature Review

We focused on women and men in the United States who self-identified as Muslim and the online spaces they used albeit we recognize that any person perceived as Muslim may experience Islamophobia online.

A Pew Research Religion and Public Life (Pew Research Center 2017) study found more adult Muslim women (34 percent) than men (29 percent) in the United States said people acted suspiciously toward them. Women were also more likely to be called offensive names (26 vs 13 percent) and be singled out by airport security (21 vs 16 percent) than men. Similarly, several other studies provided evidence that Muslim women experience attacks and hate due to their religion (Cainkar 2009; Kunst et al. 2012; Van Es 2016; Suleiman 2017). For instance, Cainkar (2009) found that after 9/11 Arab Muslim women in Chicago experienced twice the rate of hate as Arab Muslim men. Perhaps not surprisingly more Muslim women said the United States public would not consider Islam as part of mainstream culture (Suleiman 2017). Women who said they are very religious were far more likely to say this; they were also expressing their religiosity in their appearance. For men, a higher importance of religion did not mean their appearance rendered them more visible as Muslim (Suleiman 2017). Muslim women have been especially concerned with how they are perceived in their religiosity (Mir 2009; Reece 1996; Reece 1997).

Social media have also been used for Islamophobic messages manifested via hashtags such as #jihad to frame Muslims as violent and extremist (Awan 2014; Awan 2016; Awan and Zempi 2016; Aguilera-Carnerero and Azeez 2016; Larsson 2007). In turn, social media have played a significant role in Muslim identity management, activism, and connection (Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010; Sreberny 2015; Chaudhry 2014; Echchaibi 2013; Hebbani and Wills 2012; Aly 2012). With hashtags such as #notinmyname,

#asamuslimwoman, #jesuismuslim, #muslimapologies, and #muslimsreportstuff going viral globally between 2013 and 2016, in the lead up to the United States presidential election, Muslims used social media to speak against terrorism, to ridicule generalizing stereotypes of Muslims, and to offer one another solidarity. Especially middle-class millennial Muslims, and those sharing their attitude to openly and confidently combine faith and modernity, have embraced social media (Janmohamed 2016); using online spaces to create notions of citizenship, identity, and freedom (Hebbani and Wills 2012; Johns 2014).

Muslims in the United States have also used online spaces to better understand how to practice Islam while adapting to cultural differences (Mishra and Semaan 2010; Janmohamed 2016). For instance, first-generation Muslim immigrants use online spaces to connect with in-groups to combat isolation and loneliness stemming from Islamophobia; the more connected respondents were to their home culture online, the less likely they were to embrace United States culture (Croucher and Rahmani 2015). Especially for Muslim immigrant women, social media are tools to enact a “composite habitus”, providing channels to fit in with the culture of their country of origin, their country of residence, “and” their neighborhood (Waltorp 2015).

Few studies have regarded the intersections of online spaces and gender for Muslims (Janmohamed 2016), if so, they focused on women’s and minority organizations activities on websites (Van Es 2016), women with hijabs combining religious expression with fashion statements on Twitter and Instagram (Kavakci and Kraepelin 2017), or considered group blogs offering everyday forms of resistance when Muslim women’s participation in the public sphere was limited (Echchaibi 2013). Similarly, few studies have contrasted experiences of Islamophobia of Muslim women with those of Muslim men in the United States (Cainkar 2009; Pew Research Center 2017; Suleiman 2017) or have teased out the impact of the United States 2016 presidential election on Muslims. This study aims to make these contributions by foregrounding the voices of Muslim women and men themselves.

Method

To analyze if and how Muslim women's sense-making contrasts with Muslim men's accounts, we worked in the Detroit metropolitan area where about 200 thousand Muslims reside and "several of the [United States'] largest, oldest, and most influential congregations" (Howell, 2014:1) have developed. Hence, making this an important Muslim community to understand. We followed Krueger and Casey's instruction for comparative focus groups: "If you want to compare and contrast how certain types of people talk about an issue, you must separate these people into different groups" (2015:23). Using this approach, we conducted gender-separated focus groups to contrast how gender may play a role in reflecting on experiences. Following their guidelines, we organized mini focus groups to provide a sense of "not being alone" while also allowing everyone to talk at length about a difficult topic.

We recruited participants through flyers around the Detroit metro area and calls on social media, partnering with a Muslim organization, and using a university's research pool, which provided credit to 37 of 61 participants. Flyers and research pool information asked people to participate who identify as Muslim, are 18 years or older, and interested in discussing experiences of Islamophobia. Before a focus group started, participants filled out a demographic questionnaire. A moderator and two assistants guided each focus group; discussions followed a semi-structured interview guide probing about experiences, emotions, and responses on Islamophobia. Discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed with Atlas.ti. Themes and subthemes emerged after researchers analyzed the first two transcripts resulting in a set of codes that were subsequently applied to all transcripts. Two researchers coded each transcript.

In total, we conducted 15 focus groups with 61 participants, with three to seven participants each¹, between October 2016, shortly before the United States presidential election, and April 2017, after President Trump concluded his first 100 days: eleven groups with 41 women; four groups with 20 men. The higher number of women participants was not anticipated

but most likely due to the higher number of women students enrolled at the university where we recruited. We undertook additional outreach to men yet more women kept participating perhaps indicating higher levels of stress and pressures they experienced and felt compelled to address.

For women, ages ranged from 18 to 50 years; the median was 20 years. The majority held United States citizenship (39)²; two were citizens of Canada and India. Women noted a wide range of ethnic backgrounds: Arab, Arab American, or Middle Eastern (13); Lebanese (9); Pakistani (5); Indian (3); and one each as Bosnian, Bengal, Iraqi, Palestinian, Somali, Yemeni, Sundanese-Indonesian, Chinese, and Asian. Several noted mixed backgrounds such as “Arabic-Russian,” “Pakistani-Indian, and “Arab-Scottish-Italian,” demonstrating the diverse origins typical for Muslims in the United States. An overwhelming majority was single (32), eight were in a relationship, and one did not answer the question. Most described themselves as straight (34), six did not answer the question, and one noted to be pansexual. The majority had some bachelor’s education, an associate or bachelor’s degree (35); three had a master’s degree or some master’s education; three held a high school diploma. During the focus groups, 16 (42.5 percent) wore hijabs, and one a base cap, consistent with national data that suggests roughly four in ten Muslim women wear a hijab (Pew Research Center 2017). All women participants used at least one social media account, most used two to four, most often Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook but also Pinterest, WhatsApp, and Vine.

These social media platforms offer different types of dialogues and levels of publicness. Twitter is a micro-blogging social networking site on which people interact by posting short updates (limited to 280 characters but allowing for images, videos, polls, and links to be included), replies to each other, re-tweets of others’ contents and by marking posts as favorites. People can freely follow each other in the public setting option (fewer people use the private option). In contrast, Facebook allows lengthier word-based posts, similarly including images, video, links, and re-posts as well as marking posts with a variety of like and dislike options. Connections need approval via friends’ requests. Through invitations or open joining,

Facebook groups are a common space to interact. Pinterest, Instagram, and Vine place emphasis on video and photo sharing with brief captions; users can follow each other freely. Snapchat emphasizes chatting and messaging through the use of brief videos and photos with modifications and captions and is perceived as more private as followers need to know precise user-names or snap codes to connect with each other. WhatsApp is a messenger application that allows users to chat and share audio, videos, and images with either one person or a group. The platform uses encrypted messages and is tied to users' phone numbers; users need an invitation to a group or permission by others to join individual or group connections. Youtube is a video-sharing platform where users can upload videos and comment and vote on others' videos as well as subscribe to other users' video channels.

For men, ages ranged similarly from 19 to 56 years with a median of 22 years; the majority also held United States citizenship (17), four were Canadian³. Men noted a similarly wide range of backgrounds: Lebanese (7), Pakistani (4), Arab or Arab American (2), and Indian or Indian-Dominican (2). One participant each said they were African-American, Ethiopian, Moorish-American⁴ or white; one person did not answer this question. All identified as straight; 14 as single, three were in a relationship, and three did not answer this question. The majority of men had some bachelor's education, held an associate or bachelor's degree (16); two had high school diplomas; one held a post-graduate degree; one did not answer this question. Men used at least one social media account; most used two to four, most often Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, and WhatsApp.

Findings and Analysis

Of all 61 participants, 47 said they experienced Islamophobia online and 42 face-to-face: of the 41 women, 31 said they experienced Islamophobia online and 28 face-to-face; of the 20 men 16 said they experienced Islamophobia online and 14 face-to-face. This included messages directed to them personally as well as to Muslims in general in the form of comments, posts, and links. Our sample revealed the many nuances of discrimination partic-

ipants perceived in online spaces and an urge to make these discriminations known to non-Muslim and share with fellow Muslims. Below, we detail women and men's sense-making during and responses to Islamophobia.

2016 United States Presidential Election and Islamophobia

Women's sense-making

Minority women specifically voted against Trump, while proportionately more white women voted for the Republican candidate, demonstrating a fracture in the solidarity between minority women and their white counterparts (Cassese and Barnes 2018). During and after the election, women participants viewed social media as having become more politicized, containing more political posts and a high rate of opinion exchanged about Trump. Indeed, during the first 100 days of the Trump as president, he dominated United States news media coverage three times more than previous presidents (Patterson 2017). This coverage was likely amplified by social media, as an 18-year-old American with Pakistani-Indian roots observed: "I just feel like before [the election] social media was just strictly an entertainment thing for me, now I feel like I actually need to be a little serious to read this. ... I can't go on without seeing something about what Trump did or what he's doing or protesting or something of that sort."

Women saw especially the highly public microblog Twitter as having become more political, but also increasingly Facebook, while they perceived Instagram, which focuses on images, as a refuge from political comments. On Twitter, hashtags used to ridicule expectations of Muslims were a source of solidarity, as a 20-year-old American of Yemeni descent said of #muslimsreportstuff, which arose during the second United States presidential TV debate on October 9, 2016.

Everyone was saying, Muslims report that, or, Muslims report stuff and then they would say: "Oh, I went to go eat today" or "I went out to school." Something simple and stupid just to show that we do stuff regularly just like everyone else. We

don't do weird stuff or we're not like different. We're kind of the same world of people. I've seen that and it was really funny.

After the election, social media helped the women participants to connect with others with similar emotions regarding Trump as United States president-elect, as a 19-year-old American of Pakistani descent described:

It was just an awful day for me. I felt very depressed and just numb and just very shocked. So, when I saw people who are close to me, and people who are not close I still follow on social media, that they're going through the same emotions and they feel the same way, it makes you feel that you're not alone and that your feelings are valid and justified.

Especially solidarity across groups helped women to process the election as a 19-year-old American of Pakistani descent explained:

A lot of the activists on Facebook and Twitter ask for organization and solidarity between all minorities. So not just between Muslims, but between Muslims and black people, and that includes black Muslims, and Muslims and Hispanics, and other oppressed groups, including gay people and trans people [...] solidarity is huge, and it's really important and that really motivated me.

Emanating from the United States, the global women's marches on January 21, 2017 (one day after Trump's inauguration as president), and the women's convention in Detroit in October 2017, similarly emphasized solidarity across women. The organizers, with their varying backgrounds - including Muslima activist Linda Sarsour, African-American leader Tamika Mallory, and Latina advocate Carmen Perez - emphasized in person, statements and programming the collaboration between Muslim, African-American, Latinx, Asian, Native American, white, immigrant, disabled, straight, and LGBTQ women, and their allies. Such "organized social relationships from outside the group offer protection from harassment and assault and

from excesses of an overbearing government, while they mitigate the power of those engaged in discourses of demonization” (Cainkar 2009:7).

Such messages and displays of solidarity were important for women participants in the Detroit metro area to know others were supportive as they witnessed an increase in hate crimes after the election, attributing the spike to Trump’s “hateful comments,” emboldening others with similar views to post them. A 21-year-old American of Pakistani background summarized: “Because of the election, most of the Islamophobia is coming from what our president is saying [other woman in group: right] and what the Trump supporters are believing.” His persona was most often connected to Islamophobia by participants and social media were seen to amplify this. Several women said they were so fatigued by the constant Trump coverage and hostility toward Muslims on social media that they took a hiatus from them as for instance a 23-year-old Arab American who deleted Snapchat and Instagram from her phone. The impact on Muslim women was best described by an 18-year-old Arab American of Lebanese-Iranian background:

If I were to sit here and [pause] kind of fight back to every single person [...] that would take a toll on my personal well-being. And it’s not selfish, it’s just I have to recognize I am an 18-year-old college student. I have school. I have work. I have my parents. I have to pray five times a day, you know. It is a very draining thing to be a Muslim in America right now.

This level of exhaustion mirrors Van Es’ (2016) findings that women with a Muslim background who were active in minority organizations from 1975 to 2010 in Norway and the Netherlands said it was difficult for them to muster the time and resources to interact with mainstream news media as it was too stressful and came with the cost of facing hate and threats. Few gave interviews or wrote articles, preferring websites, leaflets, magazines, books, lectures, events, and protests to air their concerns, as this was safer and gave them more control (Van Es 2016). In our study, everyday women social media users who are Muslim expressed a similar level of exhaustion

when interacting on social media as Van Es' participants did when working with news media. That is, our women participants faced stress similar to that of participating in a relentless news cycle. While web 1.0 websites gave Van Es' participants an alternative, more controlled medium for their voice, web 2.0 applications such as social media offered our participants only a relative level of safety and control on how messages were being perceived and responded to in an instant.

Men's sense-making

During the campaign, many men attributed a negative turn in the United States to Trump, as a 21-year-old Arab American argued:

When Donald Trump is running for president white supremacy is on a rise [...] history is repeating itself. [...] We have women fighting for their rights. We have African Americans that are being brutalized by police officers. We have Muslims who are being attacked [...] the whole country itself is in a mess.

Yet, several also said they had a practical approach toward Trump, hoping he would do something to improve the economy. This was plausible given many Muslims own businesses or work in their family business in the Detroit metro area; several men participants related stories to their family store. Similarly, after the election, several men said it would be best to "wait and see" and that Islamophobia online had not increased due to Trump. For instance, a 19-year-old American with Pakistani roots said he did not notice a rise in Islamophobia on his social media accounts as he was in a "bubble" with people who "like Muslims." Nevertheless, he said: "My social media accounts took a hiatus, too, like right after he got elected. I was like, okay, I know it's going to be all about Trump so I don't want to be part of this." After the inauguration, more men talked about the negativity Trump brought for Muslims, as perhaps best put by a 49-year-old American with Pakistani background: "It's no coincidence that people are going around saying that 11/9 [United States election day 2017] is this generation's 9/11. That's how

it's commonly being framed in social media. [...] Clearly, it was a traumatic moment for a lot of people."

In the fourth men's focus group around the anniversary of Trump's 100 first days in office, a 22-year-old Lebanese American further verbalized this traumatization: "After Donald Trump's election [...] especially through [social] media [...] I've never in all my years of being alive seen such great amount of hatred. It's almost like a coup. It's almost like an uprising to a new era. It's pretty scary honestly." At the same time, this man said he had voted for Trump believing it would help the economy and despite his objection to Trump's treatment of women as "objects [...] for sexual desires." Yet, after Trump's first 100 days in office, this participant concluded he felt offended in his intertwined identities as Muslim "and" American:

When you see Trump on the media, explaining how he wants to do better for the country and then turns around and does the complete opposite, that affects me as an American, not only as a Muslim, in a very, very disappointing way because now we're at the point where we can't trust what a president's going to say.

His insistence on being American "and" Muslim was disrupted by Trump's remarks, similar to the years after 9/11 when Arab Muslims around Chicago experienced a sense of insecurity due to their religious identity and "described their citizenship as an inferior one that excluded guarantees and rights accorded to other citizens" (Cainkar 2009:3).

This example also stood out as no women in our study said they voted for Trump. While we did not ask participants to reveal their voting choice, one man volunteered that he voted for Trump. In sum, while women regarded Trump as outright negative from the start, some men participants initially endorsed Trump only coming to realize later that his verbal attacks on Muslims were not confined to campaign rhetoric but translated into harmful policies and everyday encounters. Several men blamed

Trump for emboldening close to them to express racist and anti-Muslim views on social media; a 22-year-old American with Indian roots described:

I have a friend [...] that I've known for a while [...] when Trump was running in the primaries he supported Trump and his ideologies and then when [Trump] became president he suddenly turned into like some sort of Islamophobic guy that I just don't know anymore. And it's really interesting to see that sort of dynamic play out because of this election.

Such *outparty* animus refers to feelings of disdain and discrimination felt against opposing political groups and has been previously found to be the second-largest social divide in American society (Iyengar and Westwood 2015): Americans openly expressed dislike and hostility for people and groups on the other side of the political spectrum; such instances of heightened affective polarization can significantly strain interpersonal relationships. Muslims have been consistently framed as an opposed group by Republicans like Trump. When an attack on a group based on their religious identity is combined with political platform animus the feelings of polarization and hostility could be amplified.

Men also argued that social media encouraged Islamophobia to be internalized by Muslims. Discussed in several focus groups, for instance, a 22-year-old American with Indian roots said Muslims censored Muslims not to speak too boldly against Trump albeit participants overwhelmingly had negative views of Trump. As the election discourse reduced the identity of people with a Muslim background to their religion only, and addressed them collectively as Muslims, individual Muslims have come to understand that they cannot escape this discourse and must speak as Muslims; yet working to normalize and subvert stereotypes while speaking as a Muslim, each one had to do so in an asymmetrical power structure and assess associated risks (Van Es 2016). By counseling each other if-how to speak out, men participants were work-

ing to navigate that narrow space of resistance to break the dominant discourse “and” speaking as Muslim.

Responses to Islamophobia

Women's Responses

Almost half of women participants described feeling frustrated, helpless, or hopeless when experiencing Islamophobia online: Of those, more than half said they felt angry or annoyed; almost half said they felt vulnerable and sad. This is in line with Muslim women's emotional responses in other countries who similarly have endured decades of othering and discrimination due to their religion. Van Es' (2016) historical discourse analysis of Muslim women in the Netherlands and Norway from the 1970s to 2010 mapped their consistent feelings of frustration, anger, and defeat, particularly about stereotypes as being oppressed and backward. Moreover, almost one-fifth of women participants said they felt fear or worry for themselves but also for family members, especially women wearing hijabs. Whether women chose to respond verbally online or not, simply noticing Islamophobic posts online impacted them, as a 37-year-old American said: “We respond to them emotionally if not verbally [...] And they do, you know, affect our cognition.” To cope with the emotions triggered by Islamophobia, women most often used contextualizing, educating, ignoring, and being an exemplar when responding to Islamophobia online. Especially being a role model stood out in their concerns when interacting online. Additionally, they avoided content and used humor and solidarity.

Contextualizing

Almost a third of women in six focus groups contextualized Islamophobic comments online directed to them personally or toward Muslims in general, meaning they examined the situation to understand why a person may hold Islamophobic views. For instance, an 18-year-old Arab-American woman attributed Islamophobic behaviors to a lack of proper teaching, which was echoed by a 19-year-old Lebanese woman: “I get [that]

they grew up in an environment where they were taught certain things. So, they're clueless about reality."

Educating

Two-thirds of women in 10 focus groups said they tried to educate others when faced with Islamophobic behavior. Yet, attempts to teach frequently resulted in frustration; hence, women were selective to educate only when they felt it would be effective, as 20-year-old Arab woman described one situation: "They'll be like, 'Oh yeah, Muslim women are oppressed because they wear the hijab.' And I'll be like, 'Well, you know, I kind of picked this on my own. I don't think I'm oppressed at all.'" Especially seemingly never-ending debates around oppression in relation to hijab have been tiring women out (Janmohamed 2016; Van Es 2016); a proliferation of this persistent discussion in social media has turned this into an omnipresent frustration for Muslimas.

Ignoring

Almost two-thirds of women participants employed ignoring, which meant "not" to offer a verbal or written response after noticing a hostile comment to avoid feeling a duty to respond, as an 18-year-old Somali-Oromo woman said: "I just keep scrolling, because I know it's not true [...] I can't just sit there all day saying, 'it's not true. It's not true.' [...] I just don't have the energy." Participants frequently described that Islamophobic content can easily be overwhelming and that they are too tired to deal with the ubiquity of such content all the time.

Being exemplars

More than a third of women in six focus groups discussed that they felt they had to be perfect models of Islam, including online. They perceived that it was their responsibility to respond to and stave off Islamophobia by representing Islam positively in their daily lives in physical and Internet spaces. This feeling of pressure was especially true for women with hijab,

which for some was visible in avatars, videos, and photos online. To many women, with and without hijab, this meant displaying good manners and maintaining a positive attitude when interacting with other users online. This was put best by an 18-year-old Arab-American: “You always have to remember, like for all the people you are meeting, you have to think, I could be the first Muslim they’re meeting [...] I could be the only Muslim they know [...] So, I have to be the best damn representation of Islam I possibly can. ‘Cause there’s like-one slip up, and they’re like: ‘Oh, all Muslims do this.’”

Women participants’ strong concerns to be an exemplar of Islam on social media extends Louise Cainkar’s (2009) analysis of Arab and Muslim Americans’ experiences in Chicago after 9/11. She argued that women were punished by the United States public through a high level of scrutiny, verbal and physical attacks while men Muslims were more often systematically targeted by the United States government in the form of registries, arrests, and incarcerations. She argued that Muslim women were attacked in their communities because they were perceived as a threat to the neighborhood on a moral level. As expressions of hostility against Muslims by large groups, such as protests at mosques, were shut down by law enforcement, backed up by formal laws ensuring freedom of religion as a first amendment right, individuals and small groups focused on singling out an individual or small groups of Muslim women. Especially women with hijab were perceived as a threat as “these women openly, even proudly, conform to a set of prescription and values that are interpreted as un-American” (2009:230). Similarly, Van Es (2016), in her longitudinal study on the Netherlands and Norway, concluded that Muslim women “who want to claim their full citizenship need to go to great lengths to represent themselves as being emancipated and not as oppressed” (78) to the ethno-religious majority of the country in which they live but where their belonging is continuously questioned and rejected. One strategy they used was to remind each other that they can set an example as “good” Muslims in their daily behavior (2016).

We extend these lines of argument to social media, which include a vast amount of visual material, and extend public discourse, turning Muslim

women into easy to reach and visible targets - especially when displayed with hijab or other markers of Islam. Social media include an entire landscape of Muslim-produced visual content (Janmohamed 2016) with online celebrities, fashion bloggers, preachers, YouTubers, travel bloggers, dating apps and so on. As women are perceived as carriers of culture and morale (Cainkar 2009), Muslim women's existence and expressions on social media have been contested on a different level than Muslim men who traditionally have been perceived as a threat in the form of being framed as terrorists. Women Muslims in our study anticipated, internalized, and enacted their role as cultural exemplars and worked to counter these perceptions of a cultural or moral threat by a heightened level of self-monitoring of their online behavior: what they posted, who they posted about, how and to whom they replied in which way. They used social media to push the "boundaries of American womanhood" and challenged an "American femininity [that] precluded hijab" (Cainkar 2009:244).

Similarly, Van Es' (2016) concluded that for Islam to become and remain accepted in minority Muslim European countries Muslim women, in particular, have had to demonstrate that Islam is compatible with gender equality. She argued, that Muslim women have had to be perceived as participating in the public sphere, as being strong, emancipated, and free of gendered violence. Only then would they have a chance to belong. We see this dynamic also working in the United States as our women participants used social media to actively participate in public discourse, to counter stereotypes of being oppressed, and to make the case for a peaceful Islam that does not curtail their rights and freedoms as women. By repeatedly demonstrating this level of emancipation to speak publicly, and thus confounding stereotypes of Muslim women in the United States, they ultimately broadened the category of "American women."

Men's Responses

When encountering Islamophobia online, 10 of 20 men said they felt frustrated, helpless or hopeless; eight said they also felt fatigued, annoyed or angry. Overall, comparatively more men spoke about encountering Islam-

ophobia online than women, indicating that other than in Cainkar's (2009) findings that women faced more scrutiny and hate in public spaces than men after 9/11, social media are subjecting Muslim men to perhaps the same levels of Islamophobia originating from individuals and small groups that previously mostly women Muslims encountered in physical public spaces. Men participants in our study most often used contextualizing, educating, and ignoring in response to Islamophobia while they rarely tried to act as an exemplar in online contexts.

Contextualizing

Contextualizing was the most common response to Islamophobia online among men in all focus groups (17 of 20 men) as a 22-year-old American Indian described:

That's like one of the first things I learned about the Internet, you should never take anything you see on the Internet at face value. You always have to see every side of the story. Especially with things like Islamophobia where people who are just mindlessly listening to media sources and are believing these things they say about Islam and Muslims, and ISIS.

Similarly, a 21-year-old Arab-American said he always considers a poster's background when experiencing Islamophobia online: "When I see comments from a more conservative perspective, I understand it as these individuals are more cocooned in their society."

Educating

Almost a third of men, across all focus groups, said they tried to educate others when they noticed Islamophobia online. Similar to women participants, they emphasized they only did so when they perceived people as willing to learn. A 20-year-old Lebanese man said educating others was part of his religious responsibility: "I come from a very, very religious family, so I was taught always at a young age for those who are ignorant

around me, for me to educate them. And I take that as my mission.” Men referred to educating in terms of correcting and teaching “after” being prompted when they saw an incorrect post about Islam while the idea of anticipating and preventing anti-Muslim sentiments by being the ideal Muslim on display online all the time was by far more often discussed by women participants.

In educating, men, as well as women, applied the Islamic concept of *darwa* to their behavior on social media, asking Muslims to bear witness to their religion and to invite others to learn about Islam. We did not ask about the concept of *darwa* in discussions directly but participants frequently brought it up themselves in examples. As *darwa* means interactions with other people; especially on social media may become a perceived “constant” duty, as an increased number of channels to communicate also increases ways to do *dawa*. As the former president of the American Moslem Society mosque in Dearborn, Michigan, Mahdi Ali, put it, since 9/11 Muslim scholars have put more pressure on Muslims to do *dawa*, affecting especially younger generations: “in order for you to spread the message [of Islam], you cannot do it while you are isolated” (Howell 2011:158).

Ignoring

More than half of men participants, across three focus groups, said they ignored Islamophobia online due to the overwhelming number of Islamophobic posts and a perceived recalcitrance of anti-Muslim views, as a 21-year-old Arab American best described:

You can't be a Facebook keyboard warrior. You can't go on every comment and just say: 'Hey, you've got the wrong perspective,' because people who have this conservative perspective are themselves radical. They are just as radical as ISIS, they invested in their mind is 'I am great, and these people are inferior.' So, there's nothing that you can really do about it.

Being exemplars

Compared to many more women, only one man, a 19-year-old American of Pakistani descent, said his mother always taught him patience and to prove people wrong by the way he leads his life: “instead of using social media to directly attack those people, I can use social media to show what I do, what my life is like [...] I can show how I am as [a] person, and that I feel like is a better way to [...] contradict to what people say about Islam and how they feel about Muslims.” Social media allowed participants to create posts with photos, videos, and longer texts showing themselves going about their daily lives, hobbies, and activities. As Janmohamed (2016:95) described for Muslim millennials: “During Ramadan, people ‘tweet the Qur’an’. During hajj there are passionate Twitter feeds offering emotional and intimate accounts of what it’s like to be present. Both give people around the world the opportunity to engage with important rituals and to share their experiences.”

Discussion and Conclusion

Virtually all women and men participants saw the outcome of the 2016 United States presidential election as negative. But while several men before the election appeared still cautiously optimistic or displayed a pragmatic point of view this vanished after the inauguration. In contrast, women participants never entertained any positive notions about Trump. Indeed, a majority of different minorities (African-Americans, Asians, Hispanics) compared to fewer whites reported that the outcome of the 2016 United States presidential election was a significant source of stress to them, with women reporting higher levels of stress than men, further increasing in 2017 whereas the level for men decreased (American Psychological Association 2017).

Similarly, our study finds young Muslim women and men in the United States who are regular social media users suffered high levels of stress as a minority due to the ubiquity of Islamophobia online during the 2016 United States presidential election, especially Muslim women: as a minority

within the minority - women are only 35 percent among Muslims in the United States. (Pew Research Center 2014) - they bear a higher burden by interacting online and being exemplars of their religion. This stress is compounded by exhaustion and frustration they endured by simply being on social media (Reinecke et al. 2016). Young Muslims are between a rock and hard place: engaging online is essential for professional and personal life and to connect with the *e-ummah*, the global Muslim nation connecting through the Internet (Janmohamed 2016), while at the same time this increases the probability to experience Islamophobia, undermining their sense of citizenship and belonging and facing pressures to respond in ways that are in line with living their faith, especially for Muslim women of whom more were compelled to act as exemplars online. In order to normalize Muslims, participants self-essentialized and spoke first and foremost as Muslims.

Social media can be a tool of expression and solidarity for Muslims but only if they can afford the energy, time, and emotional labor to cut through the Islamophobic clutter. Often, this was too high a burden for participants, especially for women whose level of self-monitoring their online behavior was higher due to the pressure to act as role models of Islam. This substantially limits how Muslims can take advantage of social media to make their voices heard and begs the question if social media are worth engaging in for certain minorities, at certain times, especially women who face a higher level of certain types of online harassment such as sexual harassment (Eckert 2017). More research is needed to map withdrawal practices and disadvantages to counter prevailing rhetoric that credits social media as a mostly positive, change-bringing tool for minorities and women as it can also come at great cost for their well-being.

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Notes

¹ Only one had two participants due to an unexpected no show that day.

² Several held dual citizenships with Canada, Egypt, Russia and Lebanon.

³ Several held dual citizenships between the United States, Canada, Lebanon, and India, making numbers not add up to 20. One participant chose not to answer this question.

⁴ Moorish Americans distinguish themselves from Black Americans seeing themselves as descendants of Moors from Morocco, offering Black Americans an “alternative identity to that of the oppressed negro” (Howell 2014:83).

Cultural Adoption Through Online Practices Across Social Media Platforms: The Case of Saudi Women

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Abstract:

This article reports ongoing qualitative research into Saudi women's online practices across several social media platforms (SMP). It is based on eight semi-structured interviews conducted between March and September 2015 with four Saudi women from different cities in Saudi Arabia. This work's findings address the knowledge gap between the accelerating consumption of SMP and the limited existing scholarly literature to understand empirically the relationship between Saudi women's online practices and the changes in Saudi culture in terms of values, norms and traditions, such as veiling and cross-gender communication.

Keywords:

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

Introduction

Since the launch of the Internet in Saudi Arabia in 1998 (Al-Tawil 2001), the country has gone through enormous transitions (Kuppuswamy and Rekha 2015). Taking into account that Saudi society is extremely conservative, several studies of Saudi women's online practices have focused on how virtual communities have eroded several Saudi cultural norms, for example, how the absence of formal gender segregation on social media has enabled Saudi women to build online relationships with men (Al-Saggaf 2004) and how online forums and social media platforms (SMP) have become spaces for self-expression, resistance, and demands for Saudi women's rights (e.g., in relation to driving) (Tønnessen 2016). Saudi women's advocacy online accompanied and were a part of offline changes, such as legal issues and domestic abuse (Eum 2013)¹. For example, a royal decree on September 26, 2017 lifted the ban on Saudi women driving (Chulov 2017), and this is seen

by SMP users as a victory for Saudi women's online campaign throughout 2011 and 2012 via the hashtag #women2drive (Hubbard 2017). Since then, the #Endguardianship Twitter campaign has exceeded 800 days,² at which point a royal decree recommended the repeal of guardianship law (Oliphant 2017). At the time of writing, the Saudi Consultative Assembly was debating the first proposal to end guardianship law on Saudi women (Alshomrani 2018).

The present study explores how SMP practices are challenging existing Saudi cultural norms, values and traditions. For Saudi women interacting online, certain highly restricted social norms are becoming more relaxed. For example, removing the niqab or hijab is becoming more acceptable and tolerated in online images of social media participants. The objectives of this study are therefore two-fold, to examine: (1) how Saudi women adopt SMP in terms of their cultural context (norms, values, and traditions), and (2) how SMP have re-shaped aspects of Saudi cultural norms, that is, veiling and cross-gender communication. Existing research on SMP consumption by Saudi users utilize quantitative methods such as questionnaires (see for example: Al-Khalifa et al. 2012; Shahzad et al. 2014; Xanthidis and Alali 2016). Only a few studies have adopted a qualitative approach to gather information on Saudi women's SMP consumption and behavior (Bourdaloie et al. 2017; Alsaggaf 2015; Karolak and Guta 2015; Asadi 2011; Hayat 2014). Therefore, the goal of this article is to contribute to this line of research and to introduce it into the more mono-dimensional studies of women's online social media use in Saudi Arabia

Moreover, this work seeks to bridge the gap between computer science approaches and sociological perspectives in tackling cultural adoption and appropriation in online activity. It underscores the importance of studying digital phenomena from a sociological perspective - Digital Sociology (DS) (Wynn 2009) - rather than squarely within Human-Computer Interaction or Human Factors in Computing Systems (Sauter 2013; Wynn 2009; Knoblauch 2014). Although there is a growing body of research in Human-Computer Interaction and Computer-Supported Cooperative Work on social media adoption by Saudi users (Vieweg and Hodges 2016; Vieweg

et al. 2015; Abokhodair and Vieweg 2016; Abokhodair et al. 2017), their primary intended contributions relate to how software developers should re-consider privacy design in cross-cultural contexts. This study's concern lies beyond design and programming; it focuses on how Saudi women adopt SMP *vis-à-vis* their religious and cultural norms and values by setting different boundaries in different SMP to regulate public, semi-public and private aspects of their lives where gender-segregation and veiling are represented through their online practices. The structure of this article is as follows. The literature review addresses the terms of online practices and online identity on SMP and discusses how this article builds on scholarly works, which have explored concepts of cultural adoption through online practices across SMP. This review is followed by the methodology, findings, discussion and conclusion.

Literature Review

Online Practices and Online Identity across SMP

The concept of online identity is a part of online practices but, conversely, these practices shape users' online identity. Drawing on a number of definitions (Horvath 2011; David 2014; boyd and Ellison 2010), online practices can be classified as (1) online self-representation, such as choice of profile pictures, name, biography and location, as well as the ways in which these are expressed; (2) shared interests, namely, knowledge and opinions; and (3) choices of what to share online. These issues are related to users' self-representation and impression management (Shafie et al. 2012). Online identity can also be defined as "a configuration of the defining characteristics of a person in the online space" (Kim et al. 2011:2). These characteristics consist, initially, of symbolic communication and textual communication, for example, profile image or avatar, header-background picture, username and biography, as online users choose their usernames, profile pictures and biographies to represent themselves and manage their online impression. Thus, social media users build their online identities from their online practices, choices and activities on these platforms.

Social media platforms (SMP) can be defined as “those digital platforms, services and apps built around the convergence of content sharing, public communication, and interpersonal connection” (Burgess and Poell 2017:1). SMP differ in terms of their interfaces, features and affordances; consequently, online practices and identities across various platforms also differ. Several studies have investigated this phenomenon. Van Dijck argued that online identities are shaped through the differences between social media platform interfaces (2013). Dyer investigated young people’s online practices across two SMP (Facebook and Twitter) and concluded that “the differences in design across the two sites affected the roles the participants found themselves fulfilling, the audience they felt they were performing for, and the way and modes through which the participants acted, interacted, and described themselves” (2015:4). All these findings suggest that online practices differ across different platforms and that social media users themselves are not only aware of such differences, but incorporate them in their strategies of social media use.

Cultural Adoption across SMP

Abokhodair and Vieweg suggest that Islam and its cultural traditions construct the practices of privacy and identity management on SMP by users in Gulf Cooperation Council³ countries. Significantly, they found that privacy is a “process of optimization” whereby a female may want to show a photo of herself without hijab to only female friends and mahrams⁴ (2016). They conclude that users construct their online identities in two different ways: in a constant relationship with their offline identity (e.g., using real names), and by exploiting the anonymity offered by online platforms by managing their audience through two different accounts (Abokhodair and Vieweg 2016). There is a recent study tackling Saudi women’s photo sharing on SMP which resonates with those findings: Bourdeloie et al. found that Saudi women “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” (2017).

In this article, the relationship between social media and Saudi society is a non-linear one, meaning that although the Internet in general and practices on SMP have affected Saudi culture in several ways (especially in regard to Saudi women due to the restrictions imposed on them, such as the driving ban, limited public sphere presence, etc.), the offline and pre-existing Saudi culture (encompassing norms, traditions and values) appropriates these technologies and aligns them to Saudi cultural fundamentals such as religious beliefs. Moreover, the participants' culturally pre-established beliefs and values interact with their online practices in a dynamic, negotiated and reciprocal relationship across their gendered and cultural identities as *Saudi* women.

Methodology

This article reports on eight semi-structured interviews (two per participant) conducted between March and September 2015. Purposive sampling (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003) was used to recruit four participants through the Path application (Path.com) online community. There were four justifications for choosing Path: (1) it is an online community to which I have access; (2) participants know who I am, where I live, and they were familiar with the topic of this research; (3) I could benefit from my experience and observations of these genuine SMP accounts over a long period, as I have known the participants online for at least two years.

Between March 30 and April 10, 2015, three initial face-to-face interviews took place in Jeddah, one in Alkhobar and the fourth participant was interviewed on Skype (March 5, 2015) due to transportation difficulties. The follow-up interviews were completed on Skype between August and September 2015. The interview questions focused on two different areas, aiming to identify and track transitions in online practices over time: (1) interviewees' Internet experience in general, such as how their usage and practices differ now from their early Internet experience, and (2) interviewees' SMP usage, for instance, whether they hold more than one account on the same platform. Participants were also asked to describe one episode they had experienced when they started using SMP, which they consid-

ered important and which they remembered in detail. All the interviews were transcribed verbatim (King and Horrocks 2010) and an inductive approach to thematic analysis was used (Alhojailan 2012). Two main themes emerged: (1) online gender segregation and online veiling, and (2) more “relaxed” judgments on veiling (niqab and hijab).

Participant acronym	Year of birth	City of residence	Educational level	Length of Internet experience in general (since)	Length of SMP experience (since)	Employment status	Marital status
M1	1992	Jeddah	Bachelor	2006	2010	Newly employed	Single
A1	1992	Jeddah	Now MA ⁶	2005	2011	Newly employed	Newly married
A2	1991	Al Khobar	MA ⁷	2011	2012	Employed	Married with a newborn boy
I4	1992	Al Kharj	Bachelor	2004	2009	Employed	Single

Table 1. Interviewees’ acronyms and characteristics ⁵

Table 1 supplies some anonymized background information about each participant. It is important to note that Saudi Arabia has considerable geographical variation in conservative practice. For example, Jeddah is more tolerant about women removing the hijab or niqab whereas Riyadh has been more conservative for several years. In the last few years, veiling restrictions have relaxed⁸, especially following a recent law (2016) to restrict the authority of the Saudi Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (Alarabiyah English 2016). Other rural or less developed parts of Saudi Arabia are still highly conservative and exercise censorship concerning the debate on veiling and changes to norms - a conclusion based on my own experience as a Saudi citizen living in Saudi Arabia. For example, in such areas, “relaxed” veiling practices (removing hijab or niqab) would attract vocal criticism from the religious conservative public. One interpretation is that because the local community is smaller, where “everyone knows everyone,” censorship has a stronger impact on these community members.

Venues for the interviews varied. I met M1 in a library in Jeddah, a place chosen by her because her parents did not allow her to meet strangers outside her house unless it is a “formal” place such as a university or library. There is a women-only sector inside the library. A1’s interview took place at the food court in one of the malls in Jeddah. She usually wore a niqab but when we sat down for the interview she removed the niqab and kept the hijab. In Alkhobar, I met A2 in a cafe at one of the hotels. A2 speaks English fluently; in our first interview, she asked for the interview to be conducted in English as she thought it would be easier for me to transcribe and analyze the data. When I met A2, she was wearing a hijab only but told me that she wore a niqab in her mother’s presence. She gave me permission to share this information and also told me that since her marriage, she no longer wore the niqab. The fourth participant, I4, was interviewed via Skype. Both of us were unveiled; however, based on my previous knowledge of I4, she always wore the niqab outside her house (Alkharj is a conservative city).

SMP in this Article

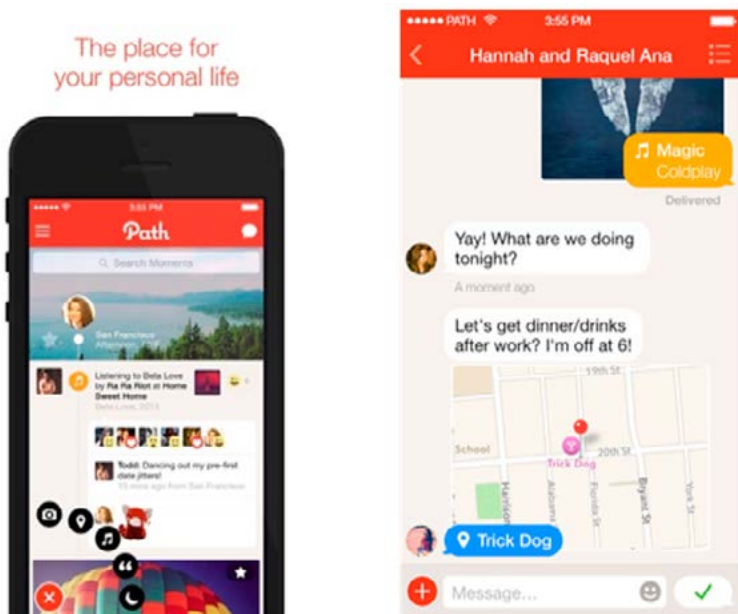


Figure 1. Screenshots of Path and Path talk applications' interfaces
(Top Apps 2014; Path 2014)

There are five SMPs addressed in this article: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and Path. Of these five platforms, Path is the least known platform in Europe. Therefore, I will explain in detail how Path functions rather than elaborate on the other four (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat) which are already familiar to most people.

Path is a mobile-based social media application which launched in 2010. To date, Saudis are the second highest consumers of Path after Indonesians. In Path's first year (2010), users could add only a limited number of people (50) as friends, increasing to 150 friends in 2012, and more recently in 2016 Path has removed the friends limit entirely. Sharing options on Path include images, music, books, movies and a check-in (location) option (see Figure 1). Users' posts are called *thoughts*. Removing a friend

is called an *unshare*. Also, there are currently four sharing privacy options (see Figure 2): (1) *public*: thoughts that can be seen by all Path users in general; (2) *friends*: posts that are shown only for added friends; (3) *inner circle*: a special customizable list of close friends—users who can see all posts once the user selects the *inner circle* star button; and (4) *private thought*: customized list of friends who can see certain posts.

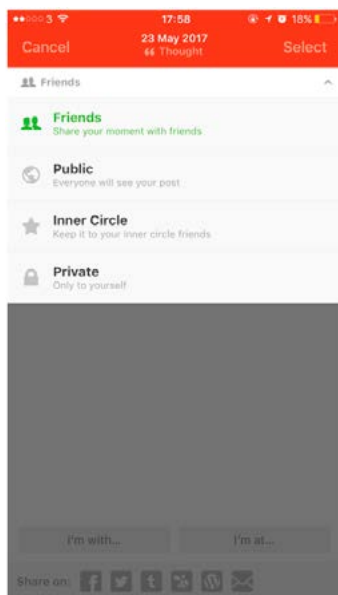


Figure 2. A screenshot taken by my iPhone of Path's app sharing privacy options.

As with many SMP, Path has a text messaging option. This was previously built into the Path application itself, but in June 2014 Path introduced Talk as a parallel application where account holders can use their Path ID to send and receive messages (see Figure 1). Users on Talk can activate or deactivate the option of read messages (indicators that messages have been read, similar to Whatsapp's two blue ticks). On Talk, there is a range of other communication options (Path 2014) including voice message recording. The findings and discussion sections below provide more detail on the read message and voice message functions in relation to participants' strategies.

Positionality

I offer personal insight into this research, through my role as a “female indigenous researcher” (Altorki 1994:66; Alsaggaf 2015:71) and offline insider on the one hand, and SMP “devotee” (Kozinets 1998)⁹ and on-line insider on the other. As a Saudi woman and a keen Internet user since 1999, I have observed closely how Saudi women utilize spaces in the online sphere and how the virtual realm has occupied a large proportion of their everyday routines. For example, in recent years, several Saudi women have become influencers as Youtubers and Snapchatters (Mirdhah 2015; Taylor 2015), sharing their daily lives with the public with and without the niqab or hijab. Thus, I started to question the relationships between these online practices and the offline sphere, given that the Internet has provided Saudi women with greater opportunities to express their opinions, discuss the challenges they face, establish their own businesses, and become bloggers and writers and more. Moreover, as an active member of both the online and offline Saudi communities, I am ideally positioned to investigate, grasp and describe the complex relationships between Saudi women’s offline and online identities.

Findings

Online Gender Segregation and Online Veiling

When offline gender segregation enters the online sphere of SMP, this segregation is less strict and takes a different form. Saudi women do communicate with men online, so the gender segregation depends on the nature and type of communication and interaction in a given scenario. For a woman to add a man as a Facebook friend and have a public conversation with him, for example, is different from using direct messages or revealing her picture. This theme presents different aspects of online gender segregation depending on the social media platform and its features. It also reveals different practices of Saudi women regarding communicating and interacting with men online.

Participants recalled how their interactions with the opposite sex have slowly changed since their early online practices on social media. Previously, the offline gender segregation rules dominated their fear of adding men as friends on Facebook, one of the earlier SMP where they created accounts. They considered that the religious concept of *kukwah* (prohibiting private communication between men and women alone in the same place) would apply if they added a man to their Facebook friends list. For example, A1 and I4 explained their early experiences with Facebook: “Actually, when I signed up I was very afraid of ‘online friends’, especially the opposite sex, I felt terrible.” (I4, March 5, 2015)

For I4, having a man as an online friend was equivalent to having his number on her mobile, which Saudi culture prohibits as it could indicate that a woman is having a romantic relationship with a man¹⁰, as I4 explained: “I have always treated my Facebook account as my personal cell number.” (I4, March 5, 2015)

After a while, I4 decided to “relax” her cautious approach, but her sister would not tolerate such a practice, so I4 found a “mid-way” solution: she would not add men to her friends list, and she would follow them only for certain purposes, as she explained:

There was this one time when my sister asked me how I add people that I don’t really know; she scared me a little, and I almost deactivated it, then I sensed that it’s not that scary, I kept it, but I stopped adding accounts from the opposite sex. I just followed them if they had personal skills or talents in writing or reading or something like that. (I4, March 5, 2015)

A1’s early online experience was similar to I4’s. A1 considered that adding men as friends on Facebook was *haram* (the Islamic concept of prohibited deeds; the Muslim person who performs them is a sinner): “I was very uncommunicative when it came to adding men. I thought it was haram to add a male friend. It was the *alsahwa* [Islamic awakening] era. I am a very different person now.” (A1, March 31, 2015). Thus, A1’s initial online

practices were influenced by the concept of *alsahwa*¹¹. However, by the end of her answer, she had concluded that she herself had changed significantly, meaning that she eventually accepted that adding men as friends on SMP is allowed.

Strictures on participants' communication with men had eased over time. Two main factors contributed to such relaxation. First, I4 explained simply that "it is just the virtual world." By virtual she means the online sphere versus the offline one. In other words, the changes to communications with men do not include face-to-face communication. Secondly, A1 realized that adding friends of the opposite sex and communicating with them online is not haram as she used to think. Hence, despite Saudi women's growing ease in online communication with the opposite sex, they still set certain limits. For example, M1 stated that she had male friends on her SMP, with whom she drew boundaries such as ignoring them or giving a "formal-cold" reply to comments she felt were inappropriate:

I mean, I have men friends, from whom I keep my distance and certain limits, and I guess they have learned that quite well - hence our long communication. If I have been away for a while, for example, and one of them comes and says that he misses me, I won't reply most of the time, and if I do reply, I do it in a very formal answer. (M1, March 30, 2015)

Other techniques of online gender segregation reported in the interviews included the careful selection of the channels of communication between men and women, for example, Facebook messages and Path talk. Choosing to veil was another strategy, where the participants did not share their faces or accept as friends men who asked them to reveal their faces. For example, M1 recalled two incidents on Path when men made inappropriate "moves". One episode involved a Saudi man, a writer and intellectual who holds a high academic position, who followed M1's "digital trace" from Instagram to Path in order to see her face:

There was this famous writer and professor in university, who followed me on Instagram, and when I used my real first and last name once, he was able to find me also on Twitter. He sent me an add request and asked me if I liked reading - I have no idea what this has to do with anything - then he added me on Path, and told me that friendship is all about showing him my face. (M1, March 30, 2015)

We might argue that as more and more Saudi women diminish the boundaries between themselves and the opposite sex, and show their ease in the practices of adding men as friends, communicating with men online and sharing their daily activities, then these changes must be affecting Saudi men themselves. However, according to M1, Saudi men continue to expect all Saudi women to act the same. M1 explained that many of her male friends had asked to see her face as part of their “long friendship”:

I haven't a clue why many of my friends right now ask to see my face, saying that they will unfriend me if I don't¹². No, this one has just added me here and there and asked to see my face immediately. [She laughs.] Why should I give him the privilege? What obligates me to show you my face? (M1, March 30, 2015)

For M1, seeing her face was a “privilege” that not just anyone could gain; it was her decision whether to reveal it, even if she is on SMP. While many Saudi women share their photos and profile pictures, other Saudi women continue not to reveal their faces and bodies as part of their online veiling practices.

A third issue relating to online gender segregation is how participants manage to segregate their audience across different platforms, designating a certain platform “for girls only”. This is the case for I4, who would add only women to her Snapchat account. As a mark of a relationship of trust, I4 would reveal her face on Snapchat as well as remove the hijab (on both

story and direct snaps) since only other women would see her. However, I4 once had to delete a story she had posted on Snapchat when one of her contacts took a screenshot of it. I4 was shocked, and when she challenged her friend about it, the friend explained in her own defense that she took the screenshot to show I4 how the colors of her contact lenses seemed uneven. Even after the friend apologized and deleted the screenshot, I4 was not convinced by the explanation:

Ah! [total silence and deep thinking] Actually, it's very rare for me to post anything and then delete it afterwards. It may happen just if I get certain replies or reactions from somebody. Actually, I have just erased a photo I posted yesterday on Snapchat, because of this girl who took a capture of it; it was the first time someone captured a photo of mine. I was very surprised, and she said that she was sorry about the capture. I thought, "It's an ordinary story that she can open anytime she wants, it doesn't need to be captured privately," so I was very surprised by her behavior and told her so, and she replied that she had erased it instantly! (I4, September 14, 2015)

Saudi women's etiquette on Snapchat, according to I4, includes the norm that a girl does not take a screenshot of another girl's photo even if her Snapchat account is closed-private¹³. Taking a screenshot puts the sharing potential on another level where the photo can be stored and circulated on a different medium, and the picture could be shown in public¹⁴. This "audience segregation" extends to privacy features on SMP. M1, for example, had two Instagram accounts: the first was private: for her family and close friends, while the second was public: for strangers and the opposite sex. M1 explained that on her private account, she had revealed "her hand" (here, she means her hands literally) and that was why her account was private:

Yup, I have two accounts on the same platform: an account just for me, I don't want other people to see it or add anyone, only me. One of these platforms is Instagram. I don't like

to reveal my hand; this account is only for my family, and I added my other account (her public one). (M1, March 30, 2015)

Becoming More “Relaxed” about Cultural Norms

The second theme emerging from this study’s findings is linked to the first theme presented. Not only had the participants’ online practices changed (e.g., initially refusing to add male friends, then later finding this acceptable), interviewees also discussed how there is greater acceptance and tolerance now, both offline and online, of some previously controversial online practices by Saudi women on SMP. As an example of this change, A2, and I4 highlighted the same point in their interviews.

Ghayda Aljuwaiser (researcher): Did the Internet and social networks especially make it more accepted [for women] to use their real face like avatars and their real names?

A2: Yeah, maybe in the last two years, I’ve noticed that, you know. Before that, I was, like, how like when you, like, listen in the beginning: “Oh a woman, a girl, her picture is on the Internet. Oh my God! She will never have a future in this country.” But now everyone is, like, posting; it is, like, more than men ... like, men, even they are turning to using avatars; women are, “I don’t care; I just post it” even if it is against their families or behind their families’ backs. I noticed that they do not even care. (A2, April 10, 2015)

Although A2 professed that it was a positive thing for Saudi women to use their photos as their profile pictures, through my online observations I noticed that A2 used her face as profile picture only on her Path account - which is represented to both male and female friends. According to the participants, Path is the platform where Saudi women are more likely to use their photos as their profile pictures with and without veiling (niqab and hijab). A2 explained:

For me, I am doing that even behind my parents' back. For me, I feel like it is normal; this is what it should be like. My face is my identity - why do I have to, like, to hide it? And more women are starting to think the same, so that is why they are using their real names, they are using their pictures, they are sharing their real stuff, their lives. So, yeah, I feel like women in Saudi in terms of usage of the Internet have changed a lot, a lot, a lot. (A2, April 10, 2015)

I4 also thought that Path has helped make it more acceptable to remove either the niqab or hijab:

I feel that the changes have happened in the past two years. Especially since I joined Path. I feel that girls have developed some easiness in using the Internet. People have accepted the fact that a girl can put her personal picture regardless of whether she is veiled in real life or not. A while ago, people never agreed with girls posting their personal photos. It was some kind of crime, and the girl could never show her face in the online world. Today, it's different. On the contrary, a lot of girls actually post their real face photos online, regardless of whether they are veiled or even wearing the niqab. (I4, September 14, 2015)

It is important to emphasize here that although the participants report on more relaxed cultural norms, their own representations of themselves online do not necessarily reflect such changes. A2 prefers not to use her authentic picture as a profile picture on SMP other than Path, and I4 has never swapped her avatar for her photo. This illustrates the heterogeneity among Saudi women's online practices on SMP in general and regarding their online representation specifically. The discussion below elaborates on these phenomena.

Discussion

Online Identity, Self-representation, and Audience across SMP

The findings presented in this article echo findings in previous published research. Participants' online identities were "faceted". They switched and adapted their online practices across different SMP, shaping their online identities through the differences between SMP interfaces. Saudi women appropriate aspects of their SMP use to align with their cultural norms and traditions (Bourdeleio et al. 2017). Their online identities reflect their familial and gendered identities. In this research, Saudi women's online identities are certainly gendered, and the women manage their online practices when addressing multiple, different audiences across different SMP. Indeed, all the participants managed their audiences across SMP to control and regulate their photo-sharing practices, reflecting other recent research (Abokhodair et al. 2017). I4, for example, designated Snapchat for women contacts only, while M1 made her Instagram account private because she did not want people other than her family to see her "hand". This echoes Al-Saggaf's observation that Saudi women are "aware of the danger of displaying their photos" and are "very conscious about their privacy" (2011:14). It also resonates with Bourdeleio and colleagues' work: "They take into consideration the space in which the picture was taken, the subject of the picture, and its privacy setting" (2017). Moreover, friends and family are part of the online audience; consequently, participants in this research "appropriate their shared content for the audience" (Dyer 2015:20). Hence, Saudi women's online practices on SMP are constantly negotiating with pre-existing offline cultural contexts. Therefore, practices such as cross-gender communication and veiling are changing over time by becoming more relaxed.

Offline and Online Spheres

The findings here are in line with Alsaggaf's work regarding "the continuities between Saudi women's online and offline worlds [and] the ways that cultural expectations shape participants' online self-presentation and social

activities” (2015:2). In this study, the participants’ offline cultural expectations (such as veiling and cross-gender communication) shaped their online self-presentation and practices, and their *al-khososyah* (privacy) concerns dominated their online practices on SMP (Abokhodair and Vieweg 2016). Thus, the participants navigated their SMP behaviors according to their cultural contexts. Moreover, all the participants were highly educated. A2 had lived independently outside Saudi for a couple of years, yet she still hesitated to adopt her photo as her SMP profile picture. This chimes with Asadi’s observation: “While well-traveled and educated, Saudi women remain conservative enough to accept the traditional systems in Saudi Arabia.” (2011:5).

What is New?

More relaxed cultural norms and traditions now extend across different SMP. Several studies of Saudi women’s online experiences have explored cross-gender communication and concluded that Saudi women are “less inhibited about the opposite gender” in online communication where “the continuous dialogue between the two genders may make them get used to each other’s presence” (Al-Saggaf and Begg 2004:10). This was apparently the case for A1 and I4. In their early online experiences, they refused to add men as friends on Facebook, but over time their online practices communicating with the opposite sex grew more relaxed. The findings of this article extend previous findings beyond matters of cross-gender communication, for instance by documenting how Saudi women’s online practices on Path have led to a loosening of certain cultural norms and traditions such as veiling. This contradicts Tamimi’s argument that “the Internet has not succeeded in breaking down gender and social boundaries as expected” (2010:49).

Saudi women’s online experiences are constantly challenging the offline cultural and societal rules. In participants’ early online experiences, cross-gender communication was the first thing to change; online spaces enabled women to establish free and open relationships with the opposite sex, which proved to be an Internet culture shock for Saudi women. With the rise of Web 2.0 and social media, veiling became the focus. For the increasing numbers of Saudi women who do not wear either the hijab or

niqab in the online sphere, social media affords a means of visual representation. As participants in this research stated, the online Saudi community is more tolerant now of seeing a Saudi woman without the veil. As Karolak and Guta argue, “the Internet provided Saudi women with a space to negotiate the boundaries imposed on them by cultural and societal rules” (2015:11).

The data presented in this article encompass a broader range of SMP (Facebook, Instagram, Path, and Snapchat) than in previous research in this area. The article adds to the field by demonstrating what these platforms mean to Saudi women users, contributing to cross-cultural comparisons of how people consume social media platforms. For example, in one study, Facebook was used like “a diary” by the participants (Dyer 2015), while in this research, Path is preferred as the most convenient platform for Saudi women to share their daily lives.

Limitations

The results in this article are very promising, but there are several limitations to the study. Participants are of similar age. All of them are educated Saudi women living in modern cities. Three participants (A1, M3 and I4) were unemployed, two of them (M1 and A2) had traveled outside Saudi Arabia during the long time I had known them, while one (A2) had worked and studied in the UAE by herself. Furthermore, all speak English either fluently or at a good level. These homogeneous characteristics beg an important question: do Saudi women of other ages and educational backgrounds, who may not have traveled outside Saudi Arabia due to stringent restrictions imposed on them, have different stories to tell about their SMP practices? Another limitation is the small sample size. A larger group of participants would potentially strengthen the validity of the findings and yield greater depth of understanding (see future work section).

Future Work

Further data analysis of a broader sample is complete. Moreover, with the expanded sources of data, online observations and semi-structured

interviews, this project has captured valuable information on topical and “trendy” Saudi women’s causes, for example the #endguardianship campaign. Future publications emerging from investigations in this project aim to achieve even deeper insights into Saudi women’s online practices on SMP, by adapting to and engaging with sociological theories (Sauter 2013).

Conclusion

Al-Jabri and colleagues assert that “the personal and social motives behind the use of social network sites in the Arab region particularly Saudi Arabia is ill understood due to a dearth of research on the region” (2015:3). This study helps bridge the existing gaps in the research literature on social media consumption and usage with regard to Saudi Arabia in general, and Saudi women in particular. Moreover, the study brings “Intersectionality into DS” (Cottom 2016:1) given that “we are living in a global era yet too few studies address how non-western cultures adopt technology” (Mark et al. 2009). The findings presented in this article add to the ongoing scholarly conversation on cross-cultural adoption of SMP and the extent to which online practices on SMP have reshaped the offline sphere.

This article aimed to understand Saudi women’s cultural adoption of SMP and the relationship between their offline sphere and online practices across different SMP. Findings illustrate that Saudi women navigate their online practices on SMP with different “techniques” and they adopt SMP as “places” where complex social interactions occur based on the Saudi cultural context. To construct online representations of offline gender segregation and veiling practices, Saudi women appropriate SMP privacy options, reveal different aspects of their daily activities, and navigate across different platforms. Moreover, the participants perceived that different platforms afford different levels of privacy, ranging from public (Facebook) and semi-public (Instagram and Path) to private (Snapchat), representing different online spaces where Saudi women’s online identities and representations differ across platforms. The last section of the findings addressed how strict cultural norms on veiling (niqab or hijab) are in some cases becoming more relaxed.

A recent article in *Forbes* describes the fast pace of change in Saudi Arabia as being harder to keep up with than the Kardashians (Lindland 2017). There is no doubt that the situation of Saudi women is changing, but as Lindland observes in her closing comments: “The decree may change at a moment’s notice, but it doesn’t mean a woman’s life will change at the same speed” (2017). Herein, this research study acknowledges its own limitations and calls for future studies to explore the dichotomy in the offline and online spheres for Saudi women. How is the online sphere impacting the offline sphere? In which practices and attitudes and to what extent? How do Saudi women react to such transformations? The present findings offer glimpses of Saudi women’s online practices across SMP in light of Islamic and cultural values of the Saudi social context. More in-depth understanding is needed, but we should heed Silverman’s (2015:446) arguments on the value of qualitative research in comparison to journalism. Despite the “Kardashian” pace of social change for women in Saudi Arabia, scholarly investigation enriches the literature landscape, not by trying to “catch up” with the latest transformations, but instead by offering a thorough investigation of Saudi women’s voices, reactions to and negotiations of such changes.

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Notes

¹ In July 2016 #saudiwomendemandtheendofguardianship went viral on Twitter; a few months later, Saudi mufti announced that guardianship in Islam applies only in marriage. See, for example *Reuters Online* 2016.

² Check the hashtag on Twitter: [اسقاط_الولاية_نطلب_سعوديات_#] [#Saudiwomendemandtheendofguardianship]

³ "Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), political and economic alliance of six Middle Eastern countries - Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman.

The GCC was established in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in May 1981. The purpose of the GCC is to achieve unity among its members based on their common objectives and their similar political and cultural identities, which are rooted in Islamic beliefs. Presidency of the council rotates annually” (Encyclopædia Britannica 2015).

⁴The male guardian in Islam is a relative by blood or marriage to a woman, for example, father, brother, uncle and husband.

⁵Their educational levels, employment, and marital statuses have changed since 2015.

⁶Masters student

⁷Masters student

⁸What I have observed on my last visit to Riyadh in January 2016 and what Saudi women whom I know mentioned several times in our discussion regard veiling restrictions in Riyadh.

⁹A term Robert Kozinet coined in 1998 to mean an Internet user who is engaged in the network and in activities on various platforms.

¹⁰Of course, it is different if the number belongs to the driver, the janitor, or another man who has any other formal or professional purpose in the woman’s life.

¹¹An “intellectual highly religious-conservative ideology” era that Saudi Arabia went through between the end of the 1970s until the late 1990s. For more details, check *Le Renard* (2012:108).

¹²Here, I commented, ‘Even after knowing each other for years?’ She answered by mentioning the first incident.

¹³In general, there is an “unwritten rule” among Saudi women on Snapchat: girls do not take a screenshot of another girl’s photo if her Snapchat account is closed. Even on Path, if a girl shares her picture in a “closed thought” (only for girls), she assumes that none of them will save this picture.

¹⁴The case is not the same for all Saudi women, of course; there are a number of public Snapchat accounts by Saudi women who wear the niqab the hijab or neither. This research does not aim to generalize these practices to all Saudi women; it illustrates only what the study participants have reported.

Echoes of Populism and Terrorism in Libya's Online News Reporting

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Abstract:

This article focuses on news reporting in Libya, assessing both official and citizen journalism. Special attention is paid to online resources, primarily spontaneous posts written in Arabic. Social media shows the emergence of citizen journalism together with so-called User-generated Content. Both have proved capable of creating legitimacy. Political inclinations, including Islamic ideology and its religious claims, are presented, supported, or criticized by ordinary citizens who post their comments and opinions on the web. Official press and news agencies have their social media profiles as well, sharing the same online space with nonprofessionals. Monitoring and analysis of reporting show that there is no relevant difference in journalistic models; nor do concerns between professionals and nonprofessionals vary. Libya appears today to be a mosaic of different interests: one that is interconnected and in conflict at the same time. These interests are vying to establish new supremacies in the country. Journalism in its various typologies faces pressure from the abovementioned interests, so it is negatively affected by rhetoric in both reporting and commentary. These preliminary arguments lead us to the core topics of populism – for which a definition is suggested – and reporting about terrorism in Libya. Against this background, we analyze news flows, sources, and other issues. I conclude with a brief review of the main issues, the characteristics of the Arabic narrative discourse, and the emerging Arabic lexicon.

Keywords:

Islam, Libya, social media, journalism, populism, citizen journalism

Introduction

This article aims to analyze news reporting in Arabic about current events in Libya. The difficult, unstable situation in Libya has encouraged the

spread of citizen journalism carried out by nonprofessionals who have a level of media literacy comparable to that of professional journalists.

Libya emerges as an interesting setting for so-called *User-generated Content*, diffused by social media. The term *User-generated Content* (OECD 2007) refers to Internet content (pictures, audio, video, and texts) created and directly uploaded by amateur users. This has given birth to a new “citizen media” sector.

Such a development offers both opportunities and challenges. It encourages media pluralism and participation, but it also involves risks and important problems. The first concern is with regard to accountability, because user-generated content can be misleading for online readers. Then, there is the fact that content can be manipulated before publishing. The high number of users involved complicates the monitoring of outlets and sources and impedes verification of reliability and truthfulness (Comninos 2011). Given these first considerations about the pros and cons of citizen journalism in *User-generated Content*, it is clear that, in a country like Libya, spontaneous reporting can be negatively affected by populism (see below) and terrorism-related claims. Bearing this in mind, after reviewing the framework of recent events, we then study news flow, sources, and other issues.

A Look at Recent Events

Libya has never been a country that is easy to access. Obtaining a visa often takes a couple of years for most applicants, even with the support of their home embassies and diplomatic missions based in Tobruq or Benghazi. Today, after the closing or dismissal of many consular sections, it is even harder to conduct research inside the country. For this reason, analysis and studies concerning Libya tend to be based on open source information, citizen-reported news or comments on older online posts.

The capture and killing of Colonel Gaddafi, on October 20, 2011, marked the beginning of a new era in Libya. Sadly, however, the transition to a different political system is taking too long and has led to the formation of

two centers of formal authority: Tripoli and Tobruq. Apart from these two capital cities, Derna, Sirt, Benghazi and the southern areas of the country have emerged as territories of strategic importance. This is both due to their geographical collocation and the relevance of the social groups living there.

Between 2014 and 2015, Derna and Benghazi fell under the control of the Islamic State; the latter consisting of local actors and foreign jihadists from Iraq and Syria. These different militias initially moved to the south, and then back north toward Sirt and Misrata. Sirt is considered the last stronghold of Gaddafi's loyalists. The latter group is prevented from holding public office based on a law issued in 2013. The "regular" Libyan Army, in which key positions are reserved for actors living in Tobruq, bombed Sirt with several air strikes targeting the TV and radio stations, the local power plant, the hospital, and the university.

The South of Libya is under the control of Tuareg and Tebu tribes. The Tuareg were former allies of Gaddafi, while the Tebu are favored by Libya's current *ad interim* government. The Islamic State recruits its members among the opponents of the new political initiatives. It is considered politically close to the groups in Sirt and the Tuareg in the South. Research institutes like the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security (Binetti 2015) report that the Islamic State is deeply involved in human trafficking operations: especially of women. Many researchers investigate the issue of human trafficking by pursuing two separate tracks: the control exercised by criminals over the coastal strip of Libya (Amnesty International 2012) between Sirt and the Tunisian border, and the criminal organizations that manage the departures of migrants from those coastal areas to Europe.

Several press agencies have made reports based on interviews with people who reached the southern European coast. They speak of the brutal treatment and imprisonment practices to which these migrants have been exposed. UN reports like the one issued in June 2017 (UN Security Council 2017) attest to the presence of the Islamic State along the coastal strip between Sirt and the Tunisian border. Due to this strategic positioning, the

Islamic State naturally plays a crucial role in illegal trafficking operations: although it does not manage them directly. In fact, migrants are controlled by different criminal militias. Their arrival and placement in the coastal area controlled by the Islamic State are tolerated based on a give-and-take principle: traffickers plan the arrival of migrants to the coast, which is accepted thanks to the fact that these migrants are used as human carriers for delivering weapons to the region. The same UN report (2017:186) writes about “two migrants being used as ‘mules’ to transport weapons.” The picture is very fragmented; however, it is clear, that many militias and criminal groups have control over the Libyan coastline.

In any case, the mapping of Islamic militias in Libya is not easy at all. Likewise, it is difficult to interpret. In fact, Libya is a Sunni country without the traditional trifold partition of Sunnis-Shiites-Kurds typically found in Syria and Iraq. This explains the extreme fragmentation in many more than three macro-groups, which affects both the civil society and the jihadists groups we speak about; plus, it complicates the analysis of the political scene. To provide a few examples: the Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade, considered a branch of Al-Qaeda, operated in favor of the Tripoli Government, but only due to its rivalry with the Islamic State. The coastal strip from Sirt to the Tunisian border is home to militias like Ansar As-Sharia and Majlis Shura Shabab al-Islam. Other brigades - Islamic or not - back the Tobruq political elite, in exchange for access to interests in the fields of the oil crescent area. Every Islamic group aims to establish its own control over the major projects in the country: the Great Man-Made River water project, the oil fields, and power plant sites.

Apart from their existing differences, Islamists, as well as formal groups, seem to lack centralized, stable leadership. Given that there is no single pole (axis) of formal power, the authorities have severe difficulties identifying informal enemies (militias of fighters or Islamic brigades of terrorists) in these various local settings. Politics in general is complicated due to the difficulty of finding one actor, representative of the whole country, who is able to engage in dialogue, cooperative efforts and civic initiatives on the local and international levels. This explains the uncontrolled growth

of groups that trust only themselves and who attempt to defend their own particular interests, legal or illegal, in oil fields and oil exports, human trafficking, and agreements with Western powers.

A Chronology of Political Initiatives

The Government of National Accord

On December 17, 2015, a UN initiative led to the establishment of a Libyan unified government, supported by the UN as the sole valid interlocutor. The Government of National Accord was installed in 2016, guided by Fayez Al-Serraj. It was an attempt to put an end to the rivalry between the House of Representatives and the General National Congress. The former was based in Tobruq and established in August 2014, while the latter was elected in July 2012 and based in Tripoli. It was later dissolved in August 2014.

The Skhirat Agreements

This initiative took place in Morocco on December 17, 2015, under the patronage of the UN delegate to Libya, Martin Kobler. The aim was to legitimize a sort of executive Presidency Council in Tripoli while keeping the Tobruq actors as a parliament in support of the Tripoli executive. This plan failed due to internal and external competition. Many militias then tried to take control of the oil fields and power plants in the oil crescent. They saw this as an obstacle to the political and economic policies of the new-born presidency and hoped to carve some space for themselves in the Libyan political scene.

The Ceasefire Agreement in Paris

On July 25, 2017, the leader of the Government of National Accord, Serraj, and the Field Marshall Haftar, leader of the Libyan National Army, met to set up a ceasefire under the patronage of the French president. They also discussed the date for the next elections: tentatively planned for spring 2018. The ceasefire could not be agreed due to the fact, that Serraj does not

control any military forces, while Haftar is supported by several nongovernmental, armed groups. This put him in an ambiguous role and undermined his credibility as a leader. In particular, Haftar seemed to be seeking political office in return for his ability to maintain control of certain militias.

The Role of the UN: from Kobler to Salame

The former UN delegate Kobler, who promoted the Skhirat initiative, was replaced by Ghassan Salame last June. Salame remarked on the importance of creating a centralized government and a unified army to represent the country's various interests. Salame centered his diplomatic efforts around the topics of illegal immigration and the people's suffering. He gave top priority to caring for the people and creating a unified government. These were key factors for sorting out any other issues in Libyan politics.

The Media in Libya: from Gaddafi to the Present

Government control over the Libyan media was very heavy-handed during the Gaddafi era. At that time, reporting was exclusively a propaganda tool. Media outlets were subject to the authority of the People's Committees, consisting of the dictator's loyalists. In 1971, media were placed under the control of the Ministry of Information; a year later a press code was instated. Attempts "to tarnish the country's reputation" were punishable by life imprisonment and offering "theories or principles" aiming to change the social system's basic structure or to overthrow the State's political, social, or economic structures was punishable by death (El Issawi 2013).

In 1975, the Ministry of Information became the Secretariat for Information, and later in 1988, it became the Ministry for Information and Culture. One last change took place in 2011, with the birth of the *Jamahiriyah* General Information Corporation. The latter was given control over the media. Regardless of these name changes, the Libyan media was still limited to publishing news approved by the regime. The *Jamahiriyah* National News Agency had monopoly control of the news.

The fall of the regime in 2011 was not sufficient to give birth to professional journalism. This is because the lack of professionals was due not only to repression but also to a deficit of proper journalism skills. In December 2011, the ad *interim* government promoted the creation of a single, national TV station and radio station and one newspaper. Private outlets were not forbidden, but they received very limited funding (both in total amount and the period for which money was supplied). Additionally, a Committee for Supporting and Encouraging the Press (CESP) was organized with the principal aim of destroying what was left of the media associated with the former regime's media. A High Media Council was established in May 2012. It had the task of regulating the media; a process that ran the risk of recreating conditions for new State control over the information sector. The private sector also saw a proliferation of initiatives. Funding came mainly from liberal actors (for the Libya Awalan channel), the Muslim Brotherhood (for Libya Al-Hurra) and Qatar (for Libya Al-Ahrar).

Citizen Journalism. Competence in Reporting, Information Gathering and Media Literacy in Libya

In principle, citizen journalism helps shape the concept of citizenship as associated with participation in civil society and politics. In fact, participation contributes to the democratization of a community and its system of communication. There are factors that promote participatory journalism: availability of communication tools, easy access to platforms and the emergence of the private sector and commercial companies in the field of reporting. Mobile devices seem to provide the easiest-to-use tool for taking part in the communication process: they help users produce and consume news. In many African countries, mobiles also represent the only communication and information tool available to most people.

Citizen journalism contrasts with institutional journalism in the sense that it is not subject to any formal governance. Citizen journalists are distinct from other reporters because they take the initiative to report on something that is happening within their community. Their reporting is totally people-centered. Consequently, official journalism is depicted as elitist, often

profit-seeking and difficult to access from outside, rendering it undemocratic. On the other hand, the values of citizen journalism usually focus on human rights, justice, peace, and respect for diversity. Ordinary citizens attempt, and often succeed, in de-professionalizing and de-institutionalizing journalism. Meanwhile, they encourage participation. Sadly, they face the huge problem of funding: this is why some forms of *institutional citizen journalism* exist within a structure that provides support for, and protection to, its nonprofessional reporters. This happens when famous, well-established media encourage citizens to leave contributions on their websites; for example, by posting comments. In fact, traditional media acknowledge the importance of ordinary citizens' involvement and appreciate this new form of journalism. The current risk is that the new platforms have become a marketplace for advertising content from traditional media, without the power to affect the opinion of others and to transform their lives.

Here, I will give the examples of two Libyan citizen journalists, and I invite the reader to evaluate the fragility of their position compared to their high level of activism. Mohammed Nabbous founded and worked for Libya al-Hurra, a TV channel that broadcast via an illegal satellite connection to avoid censorship. He was killed on March 19, 2011, while reporting from Benghazi. Eman Al-Obeidi was a law student who entered the Rixos Hotel, where Gaddafi detained international reporters. She said that she had been raped by Gaddafi's forces during an anti-regime demonstration. She was immediately placed in a vehicle and taken away by the dictator's loyalists. Then, the government spokesman accused her of drunkenness and likely prostitution.

Prior to analyzing Libyan media, it is important to recall the meaning of information literacy and media literacy. Joint and Wallis (2005) defines the term *information literacy* as a set of skills required to make use of and navigate in the electronic environment. In addition to these basic abilities, a media literate person possesses a deeper level of perception and critical thinking; they check and examine information's authenticity and accuracy. In fact, the term *media literacy*, according to Nijboer and Hammelburg (2010:36-45), is used to incorporate various forms of literacy: information

literacy, visual literacy, textual literacy, new media literacies, news literacy, and mass media literacy. In practice, this means that a media literate person not only reads news but also creates news.

It is true that new media allows the same person to produce and consume information. They are simultaneously an active and passive part of the processes of message selection, design, and transmission.

The crucial role of spontaneous journalism is that it can create legitimacy and build consensus: intentionally or not. The Internet has many devices for testing and improving the strength of someone's reporting: counting the "likes" or the number of followers is a way of receiving feedback. If negative, authors can modify their content, the style of their news, or the channel they use for sending it. Information that results from the spontaneous initiative is called User-generated Content. It is characterized by extreme flexibility and is subject to repeated and "live" changes. Many audio or visual materials are uploaded to the Internet by nonprofessional users. All these users are motivated by the desire to share information they consider relevant or true. This practice goes beyond any restrictions traditionally used in the field of news reporting; this in the sense that content is published before it has been evaluated.

Official journalism, on the contrary, prefers to disseminate news only after verification. Professional reporters must filter their news and disseminate that which is reliable. Indeed, verifying news or content posted by private citizens challenges media analysts for two main reasons: (1) the huge quantity of data (in relation to a limited period of time) and (2) the speed of collection. A high number of videos and pictures can be posted in a very short time. These, in turn, cannot be adequately evaluated for truthfulness or reliability. Authorities - a part when they decide to exert a severe censorship - are generally not able to filter such a continuous flow and can only monitor it. The result is a vast amount of unchecked information available on social media, competing with official sources and channels used for reporting. The issues of complex-

ity and ambiguity emerge here: reflecting the complexity faced during analysis of self-produced materials and the ambiguity linked to their nonprofessional and unverified nature.

Different media convey different interests; they need to address similar topics because they compete in gaining consensus on current events. Then, they operate a sort of reciprocal accommodation concerning news content. In doing so, each medium focuses on the same topics and follows recurring patterns in news design. Websites, official governmental departments, citizens' posts, and the Islamic State news agency focus their attention on a specific selection of events that do not offer a broad or complete overview of the country. Observation of news reporting in Libya shows that, from week to week, different actors and geographic areas attract attention; yet, they do this without keeping track of events reported just a few days earlier. The reader works hard to keep abreast of daily narrations and has to make a very personal effort to link and relate different happenings and protagonists. Correlation and analysis are not facilitated by Libyan media. This happens because the official media are not up to the task of freeing themselves from the censorship operated by the new elites: so they simply avoid taking a position. Content produced by nonprofessionals has its weaknesses, too. In fact, such content can be posted on an emotional whim, without the key ability to translate it into relevant political or economic context, in spite of the great opportunity that social media provide citizens, the lack of criticism - lack of a high level of ability to interpret facts and formulate opinions - impedes the development of effective investigative journalism. This has caused, in part, the failure of revolutions: in Libya as elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa. It also explains why social change is taking so long to take root.

Methodology and Approach

Taking into account the above-mentioned media literacy and the significant spread of User-generated Content in North African countries, as a side effect of the diverse Arab Spring, I investigated the situation in Libya where less research has been done. I collected data by reading and translat-

ing news written in Arabic and publicly available online: via blogs, social platforms, discussion groups, user posts and articles. I did not use any software or additional tools apart from my laptop and an Internet connection. This basic equipment, integrated by my competence in Arabic language, allowed me to gather a large amount of data in a short period of time, that is over a few months in autumn 2017.

The content of these open sources challenges the investigators' abilities, should the investigator wish to switch their role from monitoring to assessing. Indeed, when evaluating information available online, many factors need to be considered. First of all, does the information merely signal an isolated fact or does it allow for broader generalization? Does the gathered news indicate and signal an event, or does it provide warnings as well? My research suggests that the analysis of open source information requires a high degree of specialization in communication sciences and strategies for assessing spontaneous citizen reporting.

In fact, several indicators deserve utmost attention: the structure of the text format, its credibility and reliability, and its confirmation and corroboration. Every factor mentioned constitutes a problematic aspect. For example, online texts are usually unstructured, or they can be highly structured: in the sense that they include audio and video components integrated into written content. This added complexity demands deeper analysis; specifically, review of content as concerns production time and location for the final piece as well as of its separate parts.

Credibility and reliability relate to news content: the topic. It is crucial to group together documents or sources that report on the same subject in order to triangulate or confirm the information they provide. Nevertheless, if various channels, platforms, or outlets report a similar fact, it could be that they all relied only on the same source which may be groundless or erroneous. Without verification, the same alleged fact may be repeated many times, may be validated and the source considered credible enough. The same is true if a source anticipates an event, reported later by an official or national channel; in such cases, credibility increases. Credibility and reliability are also assessed

on a scale that assigns scores for authenticity and trustworthiness. The more outlets that provide the same information, the more likely the information is to be true. Such a process takes place through a so-called corroboration step. The critical point is that we cannot assess credibility and reliability once and for all, as both are subject to changes and instability.

Corroboration is very problematic because the repetition of the same interpretation of the same fact tends to lead to an agreement. Considering all the above factors, whoever makes use of open sources for investigations must adopt a mixed methodology and multi-level approach. This means taking into account private and public outlets, assessing products produced by professionals and nonprofessionals, and considering different political preferences or interests. This is the only way to offer a valid analysis. This was precisely my intention and the result of my presentation here.

A Selection of Concrete Examples

The selection presented here is chosen from a wider collection of articles and posts analyzed on a weekly basis in autumn 2017. The choice of Libya is due to the country's particular status. Libya offered a wide array of social media and personal devices used in reporting, as in many North African countries; however, Libya suffered more, and for a longer time, the side effects of the (failed) regime change. Any Libyan citizen reporting is heavily affected by populism and terrorism claims. In fact, many militias or brigades as well as government offices have opened their own sites or have created specific social media profiles. The online space is overwhelmed by these kinds of users; they are effectively majoritarian compared to the authentic, spontaneous reporting done by ordinary citizens. It is not possible to provide an exhaustive survey of all the parts and actors involved, but I attempt to focus on the more active ones; or the ones whose messages were more accurately constructed. This is the part their content that was in most cases groundless, biased, offensive, or violent.

This section then offers a selection of news from Libyan media and pays attention to the choice of topics and message design; including the Arabic lexicon and the channel used for publishing.

We observe that reporting takes place through a narrative discourse without comments. News takes the form of a “short story with a happy ending.” The happy reporter conveys bad news, too; for example, when we read a post by Amaq. From the Islamic State producers’ point of view, the destruction of an enemy target, as well as the seizure of a city, is considered a happy ending.

Reporting is also generally reduced to “short and simple good stories-bad stories” due to a sort of time-space constraint: it depends on the style required by social platforms and online communication.

Adopting a similar style and stimulated by the same motivation: populism, both professional and amateur journalists present each news story as a “success on their part”, carefully omitting elements detrimental to their mission.

But what is populism? In a recent publication, Müller (2016) defines it as three kinds of denial: populism is antiliberal, antidemocratic, and antipluralist. Populists depict themselves as the only true and honest representatives of the people; both from a moralistic and practical point of view. Whatever the need of the people may be, populists state that they, and only they, deserve the exclusive trust of the people.

Regarding populism, the Council of Europe (2017) published an interview on YouTube given in 2017 by Professor Pierre Rosanvallon. He defines populism as divisive and always “against”: against elites, oligarchies or foreigners. Populism tends to privatize key concepts (rights, justice, and authority) and the possible ways in which these concepts can be implemented.

For these reasons, populism may endanger democracy when it changes from a movement to a regime.

Given the above definition of populism, terrorist calls and journalistic reporting both seem to accommodate populism, presenting their “truth” as the only possible reading of current events. Both meet similar

requirements: messages are designed and disseminated in a way that reaches a great number of citizens, especially through social media, with the specific aim of increasing their supporter base.

Terrorist claims and news reporting are built around a narrative discourse, which presents facts and results, but quite carefully *avoids explaining* the reasons that led to the current situation. This kind of reporting creates “momentum” by taking advantage of readers’ impulses. These impulses enable readers to be controlled and exploited very easily by the ruling elites. Populations suffering from food shortages, car bombings, and the killing of civilians, or damage to a power plant as part of crossfire in fighting are all recurring subjects in Libyan articles. However, no in-depth explanation is provided for the endless state of war in the country.

The lexicon used and the level of the language are simple and repetitive. Words are used which belong to military, political, and diplomatic spheres. The same verbs are repeated many times with no synonyms. Sentence construction is done in a particular Arabic style: meaning long clauses, interrupted by several phrases inserted to provide details. Posts by Amaq differ in style because of their brevity; they go straight to the news, presented abruptly without interjections. The Islamic State posts tell us in a few lines about the place, the event, the part targeted, and casualties incurred.

Below is a selection of news with a suggested analysis of lexicon:

Posts by the Islamic State News Agency, Wikalat al-Amaq



“The explosion of a car bomb during a gathering of Haftar forces at Nofaliya Gate, southeast of Sirt.” (Wikalat al-Amaq)



„Damaging and targeting 12 elements of the forces of the despot Haftar, southeast of Sirt. With the support of only God himself, Islamic State soldiers placed a car bomb at the Gate of Nofaliya and exploded it during a gathering of elements belonging to the despot Haftar's forces. This led to damages and the death of 12 persons among them. Glory to Allah and mercy.“ (Wikalat al-Amaq)



“Martyrdom operation with a car bomb that has targeted a gathering of Haftar armed elements close to the Customs Squad, western area of Benghazi.”(Wikalat al-Amaq)



“Fall of 21 elements in Haftar’s militias, dead and injured, during an attack carried out by Islamic State fighters at a checkpoint they crossed south of Jufra in central Libya.”
(Wikalat al-Amaq)

Analysis

The four previous posts show a common pattern; they start with the fact, give details about the place and the device used for the attack, tell the exact number of casualties, and name the group of people attacked. At times, we find an expression of gratitude to Allah.

Nouns

The lexicon used is very repetitive, both inside the same post and when compared to other posts.

We find a list of nouns repeated many times:

<i>tafīr</i>	تفجير	explosion
<i>sayyāra mufāxxaxa (adj.)</i>	سيارة مفخخة	car-bomb
<i>tajammu‘</i>	تجمع	gathering
<i>qurwāt</i>	قوات	forces
<i>hujūm</i>	هجوم	attack
<i>‘unsur</i>	عنصر	element

Prepositions

Prepositions are present even where their usage could be avoided. Prepositions work as markers for relevant pieces of information: the device used for the attack (by), the party that carried out and suffered the action (from-to), the place where (at which) it took place. Prepositions are employed every time this is allowed by acceptable grammar rules.

<i>min</i>	من	from
<i>'inda</i>	عند	at
<i>'ala</i>	على	against, over
<i>bi-</i>	ب	with, by
<i>li-</i>	ل	to

Verbs

If possible, use of verbs is avoided. The infinitive form is preferred, and the infinitive works as a noun in Arabic grammar. The only verbs found here are *qāma bi-* (قام ب, operate) and *'adda 'ila* (أدى الى, lead to). I have verified that posts concerning different countries still abide by the same communication rules, that is minimizing the use of verbs and repeating a basic lexicon many times, as shown above.

As mentioned earlier, this kind of reporting builds momentum through the use of nouns and adjectives helpful in describing a fact. Verbs, typically found in commentaries and use for giving opinions, are avoided in this style of writing.

Different Posts by Private Citizens or Groups Available on Twitter



“Al-Mismari states: orders have been issued to the Operation Room regarding the freedom to open fire anytime.” (Twitter)¹



“Return of some elements of Daesh with civilian dresses to Sirt and the Department for Security of the militias Al-Buniān Al-Marsūs has not arrested anyone in these elements until now.” (Twitter)



“Based on an arrest order from the Office of the General Attorney, Fahmi Salim has been arrested. He is accused of the crimes of oil smuggling and illegal human trafficking, and he has been delivered to the Special Deterrence Forces.” (Twitter)

Analysis

Nouns

The descriptive style justifies the use of nouns more than verbs. Here too, the lexicon used is very repetitive and concerns the political and military spheres. All posts share these lexemes:

'amr	أمر	order
qabd (the same root is also used as verb, qabada)	قبض	arrest
'amn	أمن	security
'unsur	عنصر	element

Prepositions

The same prepositions used by Amaq are also found here, and sentences follow a similar pattern to emphasize some specific pieces of information.

<i>min</i>	من	from
<i>fi</i>	في	in
<i>'ala</i>	على	against, over
<i>li-</i>	ل	to

Verbs

Here again, verbs are replaced by infinitives or nominal sentences. Recurring verbs include *asdara* (أصدر, to issue) and *qabada* (قبض, to arrest). They are strictly related to the political-military context.

Between Populism and Institutional Etiquette. News Reporting of the LANA News Online Agency and the Official Communications of the Government

The examples provided here are not part of citizen journalism production. I want to offer a comparison between an institutional news agency like LANA (see above) and the previous posts from social media. This is to show that the style of official journalism is not very different from that adopted by nonprofessionals. In particular, I refer to the narrative and descriptive style, the absence of criticism and commentaries. I offer below the full translations from Arabic.

UN Delegation and Zintan Municipality Discuss the Return of 20,000 Displaced Persons to Their Homes in Tripoli



“A UN delegation and the Zintan Municipality discussed the return of 20,000 displaced persons to their homes in Tripoli. The two sides spoke about providing basic services, such as water, water purification plants, medical assistance, shelters for internally-displaced refugees, and a guarantee for the return of 3,000 families, equivalent to 20,000 displaced persons, to their homes in Tripoli. The mayor of Zintan, during a reception for the head of the UN Delegation, Mr. Salame, said: “We appreciate the efforts of the UN to gather all Libyans around one table.” This is according to what has been posted on Salame’s Twitter page. It has been reported that Mr. Salame arrived this morning to Zintan, accompanied by his deputy and coordinator for humanitarian issues in Libya. Politicians and civil society activists of the area will take part in the meeting.” (Lana News 2017b)

EU Ambassador Bettina Muscheidt after Her Meeting with Siya-la: “I came to Tripoli to prepare the return of the mission to Libya.”



“The Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Government for the Agreement, Siyala, met today in Tripoli with the EU ambassador. According to the Libyan News Agency, the EU ambassador said after the meeting: “I came to Tripoli to prepare the return of the mission to Libya”. She also clarified that the mission will work with the Libyan authorities on all matters related to bilateral cooperation; in particular, reconstruction projects for the country’s growth.” (Lana News 2017a)

An Official Communication of the Municipality of Derna

I conclude with the addition of this formal document. It is not a piece of news reporting, but it is a typical example of the Arab style of institutional communications. It attests well to the ceremonial and redundant style of Arab protocol, sometimes resulting in dramatization. It is interesting to observe the Islamic formulations; traditionally used to give extra weight and validity to statements. This is a common practice among officers in the public sector; this applies across the different Arab-Islamic countries and not just in Libya.



“The Ministry of the Local Government

Local Council of Derna

The Local Council of Derna announces to everyone that the humanitarian situation is disastrous, and it directly threatens life. There is no medicine, food, oxygen, and fuel. All the structures of the State have been damaged as a result of this intense siege. Waste has amassed in the city due to the interruption of the activities of the public utility company and the water company. This has caused an

environmental disaster and has transformed the city into a collective cemetery. We call on all parties involved to bear their responsibilities and stick to their role of protecting isolated civilians, alleviating the suffering by breaking this unfair siege and by bringing the city “life” that is food, medicine, and other goods through the seaport of Derna, which is ready to receive ships. The port is the fastest and the safest route; after all, the gate has been closed.

InthenameofAllah,wehavecommunicated.InthenameofAllah,
we are witnesses.

May Allah protect Derna. May Allah protect Libya.

The Local Council of Derna

Stamp: Ministry of the Local Government / Local Council
of Derna

Issued in Derna

Wednesday 9, August 2017” (Twitter)²

Conclusions

Libya is typical of North African countries for the role played inside the country by online, spontaneous reporting; even though the country was invaded by a number of factious protagonists. In practice, it seems that Libya did not experience the promotion of social change by social media, as occurred (albeit with limitations) in other countries; in Egypt among others. The online soft war (Jamali 2015:6-9), intended as the voice of protest spread across the web, did not play the expected role in promoting social and political change in Libya. Instead, the news war on social media outlets reflected the real daily war afflicting civilians.

The high number of initiatives in the field of news production shows that, in the post-regime era, many “new Gaddafis” have emerged in the media sector. The private sector plays the role of the rebel fighting against the state’s control over information. However, it too occasionally behaves like a controller. Professional and nonprofessional reporting are heavily affected by populism in Libya: each spontaneous journalist states that they are the only true, honest representative of people. They see this as justifying their actions: including the more violent ones. This is particularly risky considering the results of the survey reported by Jamali (2015:26). The survey found out that, in Libya, trust in social media is double the level of trust in official media. This stands in contrast to the US, for example, where the trust in the former is slightly lower. In Libya, more than in any other country, online reporting produces a reverse effect: it does not serve as a means for providing people with a channel for expressing free speech (i.e. as a tool for independent journalism). Rather, it was an additional instrument for conditioning their audience’s reasoning. Citizen reporting was in fact reporting by individuals belonging to specific factions: both those included in, or excluded from, the management of official power.

Another critical point is not only media proliferation in Libya, but also the journalist status and skills. Journalists who served during the Gaddafi regime were totally rejected by new entities, and this led to the loss of work experience. *Citizen journalists* are nonprofessionals, people that work in other fields, but who offered their biased reports during the revolution and the transition period. This large group of writers and supporters of various causes were unprepared for the task of reporting. However, they were willing to bear witness to contemporary events in Libya with videos, pictures, and film footage.

Libya is still far from achieving press or reporter freedom, since neither the private sector nor private citizens are free to choose what to write and share. The establishment of many centers for news production has given rise to clientelism. This seriously hinders investigative journalism, as noted by a member of the LANA steering committee (the former JANA agency), Bashir Zooghbiya. He stated: “It is extremely difficult for journalists

to improve upon the practices they learned and applied for years in news reporting. On the first anniversary of the revolution, they wrote stories using the same glorification style that used to be applied in covering the regime's revolution anniversaries. They just replace the phrase 'September Al Fateh revolution' [of Qaddafi] to 'the February revolution.'" (El Issawi 2013:21). In addition to this, but regarding the rehabilitation of Libyan journalism, Abdel Basset Abou Daya, the head of LANA's news department, affirmed that "the first challenge was to kill the fear factor inside journalists." (El Issawi 2013:23). Indeed, after having experienced many episodes of brutal censorship, it would be hard for a journalist to adopt a reporting style focused on the truth.

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Notes

¹ These tweets were retrieved by #Almarsad, #Libya, #Sirt.

² This document was retrieved from twitter by #Derna.

American-Muslims' E-Jihad: Trumping Islamophobia in the Trump Era

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Abstract:

Islamophobia, or the irrational, exaggerated fear of Islam and Muslims, has been on the rise lately in the United States, especially after President Trump came to office. Some of the worst Islamophobes launched their campaigns online, using the Internet as a platform to spout hatred and fuel anger and discrimination against immigrants and minorities, in general, and Muslims, in particular. In an effort to counter this dangerous new tide of Islamophobia and to overcome its destructive consequences, American-Muslims launched a number of well-orchestrated online campaigns. This essay examines the double role of the Internet, as a platform through which Islamophobia could be both fostered and resisted, simultaneously. It sheds light on some of the Islamophobic posts online, as well as some of the most popular social media campaigns which American-Muslims launched to combat and resist this complex and multifaceted phenomenon of Islamophobia. It discusses how American-Muslims understand, negotiate, challenge, and respond to Islamophobia, and its varied cultural, social, and political manifestations and implications, through a variety of mediated discourses and ongoing social media campaigns. In doing so, it emphasizes the plurality of American-Muslims' voices, identities, realities, and strategies, as exemplified in their responses to Islamophobia.

Keywords:

Islamophobia, election, USA, Muslim minorities, Internet

Note:

This text is a Comment and was not peer-reviewed by CyberOrient.

Islamophobia: Definitions, Context, and Causes

Islamophobia is a new name for an old phenomenon. The idea of fearing a certain group of people because of their culture, beliefs, values, or religion

is not new. It has been around for centuries, and it is commonly referred to as stereotyping. Islamophobia is simply a branch of a larger tide of hatred and discrimination, which includes racism, sexism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism, which became so deeply ingrained in society that it can be present in any type of communication exchange (Schenker and Abu Zayyad 2006).

Islamophobia could be defined as “an exaggerated fear, hatred, and hostility toward Islam and Muslims that is perpetuated by negative stereotypes resulting in bias, discrimination, and the marginalization and exclusion of Muslims from social, political, and civic life” (Gallup 2018). It can also be defined as “an increasingly visible ‘backlash’ against Muslims across Europe and the United States” (Tyrer 2013:3). The term *backlash* encompasses all negative messages received by Muslims, and all harmful acts against them, whether physical, psychological, or both. This includes the controversial cartoons by Danish artists in 2006, which mocked Prophet Muhammad and ridiculed Islam (Asser 2010), an act that was frowned upon by many Muslims as an unacceptable insult and mere blasphemy.

Moreover, “Islamophobia reflects the largely unexamined and deeply ingrained anxiety many Americans experience when considering Islam and Muslim cultures” (Gottschalk and Greenberg 2008). It can also be understood as a social construct that “reintroduces and reaffirms a global racial structure through which resource distribution disparities are maintained and extended” (Council on American-Islamic Relations 2016), and as an “unfounded hostility towards Muslims, and, therefore, fear or dislike of all or most Muslims” (Conway 1997).

Islamophobic sentiments in the United States heightened in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks in New York, which marked a seismic geopolitical shift in the portrayal of Muslims across the media. It changed people’s perceptions of Islam and made them anxious and fearful of an entire group of people. The attacks made people wonder if all Muslims were extremists, and if they were, when would they attack again? Given that thousands of people died that day, they were right to fear terrorists,

who belong to extremist groups, like *Al-Qaeda*. However, the problem was creating overgeneralized stereotypes that are still widely spread, even though terrorist groups represent only a tiny fringe of the world's 1.6 billion Muslims.

This stigmatization of an entire religion, due to the acts of a few extremists, stems from lack of understanding of the Muslim faith and ignorance about Muslims, which led to spreading stereotypes that are broadly and indiscriminately imposed on an entire population. More recently, the rhetoric that dominated the speeches of some of the candidates in the latest presidential election in the United States, including now President Donald Trump, played an important role in contributing to the rising tide of anti-Muslim sentiments and boosting the spread of Islamophobia on a large and unprecedented scale. Many media outlets started spreading more negative images, distorted stereotypes, and hate speech against Muslims. The wide outreach of these media venues and their immediate, instant transmission, using their online platforms, magnified their impact on many audiences. This, in turn, resulted in an escalation in acts of violence and hatred against Muslims in the United States recently, including attacks on mosques, Islamic centers, and women wearing the *hijab* (Muslim headscarf).

The Internet and Islamophobia: A Double-Edged Sword

The Internet, with its unfiltered content, can sometimes harm Muslims and negatively affect their image. Twitter campaigns, such as #banislam, for example, play on people's fears of so-called "Islamic extremism," and call for banning Islam to avoid this danger. In a new digital world, where information exchange occurs instantly and simultaneously, it is impossible to stop or censor these types of campaigns entirely. In fact, if one Twitter account is closed down, many more replace it. So, the solution is not censoring or blocking. Rather, it is effectively responding to such campaigns.

One good example of successfully responding to an anti-Muslim message was when an issue of *Newsweek* featured a cover with Muslim protestors and the headline "Muslim Rage." When *Newsweek* asked for comments and

responses from the audience, some Muslim Twitter users responded with #MuslimRage, which highlighted the bias and hate Muslims receive on an everyday basis, in the most humorous, witty, and satirical way. This included tweets such as “Cannot say hi to Jack inside a plane. #MuslimRage” and “Lost your kid Jihad at the airport. Can’t yell for him. #MuslimRage” (McFadden 2012). In other words, in contrast to the “Muslim rage” theme, Muslim Twitter users skillfully used humor, and they did not respond with hate, anger, or rage. In fact, they were wise not to, because if they did, this would have further promoted and confirmed the angry, aggressive Muslim stereotype, which would have been harmful and counterproductive.

Another good example of countering Islamophobia online was after Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump insinuated that Ms. Ghazala Khan’s religion might have stopped her from speaking at the Democratic National Convention, when she was standing beside her husband, Mr. Khizr Khan, on stage. Ms. Khan stood up for herself and spoke in a televised interview, explaining that she was silent, only because she saw her martyred son’s photo, which made her very emotional.

In response to this incident, other Muslim women started using #CanYouHearUsNow to show just how often they use their voices, and how powerful, strong, vocal and outspoken they are, in addition to exhibiting clear examples of their successes and achievements in various professional fields. In other words, they effectively, and powerfully, countered the distorted stereotype of the silenced, oppressed, and marginalized Muslim woman by making their “voices” heard, loudly and clearly, through this Twitter campaign.

One more positive and successful example of countering Islamophobia was when presidential candidate Trump answered a question by a Muslim woman during the second presidential debate about the potential danger of Islamophobia by giving an Islamophobic reply, which suggested that Muslims should always “report” anything they see that may seem remotely suspicious. This triggered a social media campaign by many Muslims: #MuslimsReportStuff, that was very witty, sarcastic, and painfully funny.

It included tweets such as “My mom cooks the same soup every single day. I will report her to the authorities. #MuslimsReportStuff” and “My brother refuses to tidy up his room. I am reporting him to the FBI. #MuslimsReportStuff.” Here again, the strategic use of humor served the purpose and created a strong and powerful impact, making it clear that one of the effective strategies needed to counter Islamophobia is creating a technologically-savvy, witty, humorous, intelligent, and swift reply, and sending the right message through the right medium to the right audience at the right time.

Other examples of positive and effective online efforts to counter Islamophobia include Unity Productions Foundation’s (UPF) YouTube video “American Muslims: Facts vs. Fiction,” which corrects some of the commonly held stereotypes and misconceptions about American Muslims, such as perceiving them as new immigrants to the United States; associating them collectively with extremism, fundamentalism, and terrorism; or thinking of Arabs and Muslims as synonymous.

There is also the #MuslimsAreSpeakingOut series of short videos, which provided a platform for different groups of Muslims, such as religious scholars, preachers, intellectuals, professionals, journalists, and laypeople, to express their views on the rise of extremism and to speak up against violence and terrorism, dissociating Islam from them. This is especially important, in response to the false impression that Muslims are not speaking up against terrorism, when, in fact, they have been speaking loudly for a long time, but they haven’t been heard, due to insufficient media coverage.

Another excellent campaign was the #Islamophobin Pill launched by the Council on American-Islamic Relations, which was a very hilarious, sarcastic, witty, and tactful campaign, suggesting that those who were diagnosed with Islamophobia, and exhibit severe symptoms, such as excessive, irrational fear of Islam and Muslims, should seek healing, by taking the fictitious Islamophobin pill three times a day until their Islamophobic symptoms fade away and they become fully cured.

It is clear that the Internet acts as a double-edged sword when it comes to Islamophobia. On one hand, with its many applications, and its instant, wide outreach, and multiple uses, it could be considered one of the main factors behind the spread of Islamophobia, not just in the United States, but also internationally. On the other hand, however, it also offers unique opportunities to counter Islamophobia and to provide some of the fastest and most effective tools to fight it, through multiple online platforms. Some of the effective campaigns mentioned above are an excellent illustration of how Muslims launched their *E-Jihad*, or electronic struggle, in the face of anti-Muslim efforts and sentiments.

Countering Islamophobia: Effective Strategies

There is no law that can be passed to limit the disrespect and hostility Muslims face, but fostering better understanding and re-evaluating bias can lead to gradual, positive change. Societies should ideally reach a more nuanced and deep understanding about Muslim populations and learn not to generalize and force their assumptions on people they do not know. Using the Internet as a platform to spread correct knowledge and better awareness, instead of hatred and negativity, is certainly a step in the right direction.

At the same time, Muslims also have a responsibility and an important role to play. “When coming to people who are believers of other faiths, instead of shouting the differences, Muslims are to raise the agreements, similarities, and commonalities conducive to a climate of peaceful coexistence” (Mirhosseini and Rouzbeh 2015:1). Additionally, they should not confront intolerance with anger. It is also important to be proactive, rather than reactive. Building strong relations with “Others” and spreading awareness and correct knowledge, rather than being on the defensive, will help to further engage non-Muslims and lead them away from Islamophobic tendencies. Ignoring the problem will not make it go away.

In order to be active citizens, Muslims must also try to actively change media perceptions through positive messages. In doing so, they should try

to reach out to mainstream media, and they should certainly keep using new media platforms, such as online forums. This is especially important in the current era of digital communication, where most people get their news, and engage in most communication activities, online. Some of the useful and successful strategies in this regard include the techniques which were deployed by American-Muslims in their online campaigns, such as dispelling myths through spreading facts, as well as effectively using humor to shatter some of the toxic stereotypes and (mis)perceptions about Islam and Muslims.

Concluding Remarks

The online tug of war between those who propagate the toxic new wave of Islamophobia and those who resist it is most likely to continue and to escalate over the coming years. Aided and enabled by the equally strong, parallel wave of *cyberactivism*, defined by Howard (2011) as the attempt to advance a cause digitally, which is difficult to advance offline, this tug of war is likely to take new forms and directions in cyberspace.

The efforts of the new generation of American-Muslims to use a new, creative and innovative set of techniques, including humor, wit, sarcasm, assertiveness, and persistence, to counter this rising wave of Islamophobia, through deploying new communication tools, mark their new wave of resistance. In pursuing this new wave of resistance, both online and offline, it is expected that these young, diasporic, and dynamic Muslims will invent new techniques, strategies, and mechanisms in their struggle to make their voices louder and their identities more visible. In doing so, they should also be looking back to learn from the lessons of the past, in order to build better strategies and more effective techniques, moving forward.

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