CyberOrient

Online Journal of the Virtual Middle East

Vol. 9, Iss. 2, 2015

ISSN 1804-3194

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Online Journal of the Virtual Middle East

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CyberOrient is a peer-reviewed online journal published by the American Anthropological Association in collaboration with the Faculty of Arts of Charles University in Prague.

Editor-in-Chief: Daniel Martin Varisco

Managing Editor: Vit Sisler

ISSN 1804-3194

<http://www.cyberorient.net>

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A Safe Refuge? Minorities and the State in Iranian Cyberspace

Bronwen Robertson, James Marchant

Small Media Foundation

Keywords:

social media, Arab Spring, Internet, activism, cyberactivism, Egypt, Internet studies, Iran

The Iranian state has consistently restricted spaces in open society for minorities to express their identities, especially where such identities are construed as representing a threat to the religious, political and sexual orthodoxies promulgated by the clerical establishment. As a result, many members of assorted Iranian minority groups have taken to cyberspace to build communities, articulate self- and group-identities, organise to overcome discriminatory practices, and connect with their allies from across national borders and around the world.

With the election of the moderate Hassan Rouhani to the presidency in July 2013, and the civil rights pledges made in his 'Citizen's Charter', there were renewed (if guarded) hopes for an improvement in the position of Iran's minorities, though tangible improvements have been slow to materialise over the past three years. Given that the state is slow to take steps that would improve the position of Iran's minorities, it is ultimately down to these communities to organise and find solutions to their myriad concerns.

This Iran-focused edition of CyberOrient aims to explore how Iranian minority groups have embraced technology to overcome systematised state discrimination, strengthen communities, and at the same time, push back against entrenched societal prejudices.

To begin, in his paper *Online Social Research in Iran: A Need to Offer a Bigger Picture*, Ali Honari casts an eye over the state of the Iranian web today, identifying the country's core online communities, their primary forums of

discussion, and the characteristics of users in these spheres. Offering some interesting suggestions for Iranian social media analysis, it is a welcome contribution to the discussion around Iranian activities in cyberspace.

Ahmed Al-Rawi's and Jacob Groshek's paper Arab Iranians and their Social Media Use delves into the social media engagement patterns of Iran's marginalised Ahwazi Arab minority, and argues that the community is being caught up in the middle of the geopolitical tussle between Iran and Saudi Arabia. It finds that fervently political state-sponsored activists from both Saudi Arabia and Iran are dominating discussions around Ahwazi identity, and drowning out the voices of other Ahwazis.

Also in this special issue, we have two papers examining other topics of interest from around the Middle East. Hakim Khatib's *Semantic Structures That Unify and Divide* analyses a series of images in order to reveal the semantic structures and signifying practices produced throughout the protests, and shed light on their social, cultural and historical roots.

A Page and its Politics: Kullinā Khālid Saʿīd in Egypt's Ideological Landscape at the Time of Revolution is a collaborative work from Robbert Woltering, Rasha Abdulla, Thomas Poell, Bernhard Rieder, and Liesbeth Zack, and analyses the content of the "We are all Khaled Said" Facebook page throughout 2011 to construct a picture of the ideological and political leanings of the popular revolutionary page.

Online Social Research in Iran: A Need to Offer a Bigger Picture

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Abstract:

Given the limits of in-country and survey research in closed societies, the World Wide Web – in particular online forums – offers an alternative field for observing and understanding these societies and their development. However, the praise given to the Internet's role in bringing about political change in Arab uprisings and the 2009 elections post protests has resulted in a tendency in the existing literature to focus on very narrow political discussions and behaviors on partisan online forums. Consequently, various areas of interest to Iranian users have been neglected or ignored. The aim of this review is to identify the major online spheres of the Iranian web, the most important online forums in each sphere, the issues being discussed, and the characteristics of the users of each sphere and forum. By doing so it recognizes the theoretical and methodological drawbacks of existing online research on the Iranian Web. This review concludes with some suggestions for further online social research in Iran.

Keywords:

Iran, Internet studies, Internet, information and communication technology, media studies, communication studies, social media

Introduction

The social and political implication of the Internet has been important for scholars for more than a decade (DiMaggio, et al. 2001). Scholars and commentators have acknowledged the informational and organizational function of the Internet as well as the coordinating, mobilizing and globalizing role it plays in challenging authoritarian regimes (Castells 2012; Howard and Hussain 2013). Internet use during Iran's Green Movement protests in 2009 and the Arab uprisings in 2011 drew the focus of attention to political use of the Internet (Farrell 2012). The terms 'twitter revolution'

and 'Facebook revolutions' shaped conventional wisdom and expectations about Internet users and their concerns and interests in closed societies. It is widely accepted that political issues are widespread on online forums in closed societies, especially in the Middle East, and that users are limited to oppositional users with political democratic concerns. Therefore, despite the increasing growth of interest in research on the Internet and using online data for social research, globally (Golder and Macy 2014) and in particular in the Middle East (Lynch 2011), little attention has been paid to the wide range of political and social concerns and issues that are discussed online in closed societies.

In Iran, the Internet, particularly online social networks, has attracted significant academic attention for the role it has played in popular protests since the 2009 elections. This has led to a considerable focus of research on political issues on the Web and particularly on partisan forums and platforms. Consequently, it has resulted in a tendency in the existing literature to neglect or ignore various areas of interest to Iranian users and to overlook indirectly political issues and concerns of the Iranian web. However, if one is to obtain the fullest possible understanding of the role of the Internet in society and to understand the society through the lens of the Internet (Rogers 2013), to have a comprehensive view of a wide range of interests and topics and consequently a diverse group of Iranian Internet users, there is a substantial need to offer a bigger picture and vision of the web in these societies.

The aim of this review is to identify the major 'online spheres' of the Iranian web, the most important 'online forums' in each sphere, the 'issues' being discussed, and the characteristics of the users of each sphere and forum. The literature review covers primary and secondary sources and studies in Farsi and English that deal with: (1) the social and political concerns of Iranian citizens as reflected on the web since 2009 and (2) online forums in which social issues and concerns are discussed.

For reviewing existing literature, I employ the categorization of Internet activity proposed by Faris and Heacock (2013). They divided research on Internet activity into three main categories: 1) infrastructure and access, 2) control, and 3) content and communities. The first section of this review gives a brief overview of Internet infrastructure, its background and chal-

lenges in Iran. For the second section, Internet control and its effects on the online sphere are discussed. The final section of this review --which is the review's primary focus-- deals with the online activities of and forums/platforms that are used by Iranian Internet users. For each forums/platforms, the demographics of the users, the prevalent topics and the users' activities are discussed based on existing studies. Finally, the findings of this review are amalgamated into one larger picture in order to give suggestions for future studies on the Iranian Web.

Internet infrastructure and access in Iran

Internet infrastructure refers to a set of remote software and hardware that sends and receives information through several systems. Internet access is one of the fundamental features of Internet infrastructure. In 1992 Internet access in Iran was provided for the first time through a single line connecting the Institute for Studies in Theoretical Physics and Mathematics (IPM) (Sreberny and Khiabany 2010). Since that time, the Iranian government has taken steps to expand and develop its telecommunications and informatics infrastructure (ibid). Nevertheless, while the development of Iran's Internet infrastructure enabled the number of people with access to the Internet to rise rapidly since the late 1990s, reports repeatedly reveal that the Iranian Internet -- in terms of limits on content, obstacles to access, and violations of user rights -- is ranked among the least liberated in the world (Kelly, et al. 2013). To assess Internet infrastructure and access in Iran, Internet penetration, Internet speed and Internet service provider are chosen as criterion.

Internet penetration in Iran is amongst the highest in the Middle East. According to a countrywide survey of 53,724 families, Internet penetration in Iran in 2010 was 14.7 percent (Statistical Center of Iran 2011). However, a recent study by the Internet National Development Management Center,¹ reports that the number of Internet users was 40,046,785 and the Internet penetration rate in Iran in 2014 was 53.29 percent, which had been 49.13 percent in 2013 (Mehr News Agency 2014). The Gallup Institute's research on a sample size of 2,000 interviewees at the national level reported 43 percent used the Internet in Iran in 2012 (Gallup/BBG 2012), which differs from another official report that the number of Internet users was

46,267,829 (penetration rate 61.57 percent) in 2012 (Etemad Newspaper 2013). Despite these differences in the statistics,² it can be concluded that Internet penetration rate in Iran has increased significantly over the last few years (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Internet penetration growth in Iran in the last decade. The data of World Development Indicators is used by me for this diagram (World Bank 2014).

Internet speed in Iran ranks among the lowest in the world, although it has been recently improved. Nonetheless, in 2012, most Internet users used dial-up and only a small percentage of Iranian users had access to high-speed Internet (Radio Zamaneh 2012), the latest official report reveals that only 9 percent of Iranian users still use dial-up (Mehr News Agency 2014). The rate of Internet connection forms most frequently used by Iranian users such as ADSL, mobile (GPRS) and dial-up are in turn 17,53 percent, 14,73 percent, and 9,23 percent (Mehr News Agency 2014).

There is a rather large Internet service providers (ISPs) market in Iran. The Iranian ministry of Communication and Information Technology had licensed more than 1,600 ISPs by August 2013 (Tasnim News Agency 2013). All ISPs must obtain a license from the government, and to do so must meet official governmental restrictions by using software that blocks users from accessing forbidden URLs.³ Nevertheless, “there is considerable variation in the blocking among ISPs” (Faris and Villeneuve 2008: 16).

It can be concluded, therefore, that although the Internet and ISPs in Iran are controlled by the government, there are a number of large businesses within the private sector in this area. Iran's Internet penetration rate is amongst the highest in the region. Despite the growth in the number of Internet users in Iran, the available bandwidth and speed of Internet remain quite low, allegedly because of the government's efforts to control the Internet (Rezaian 2014).

Internet control in Iran

To what extent does the government control Internet content, in which online spheres and how? In general, to what extent does the filtering shape the Iranian Web?

The Iranian government conducts vast and intensive filtering measures over the Iranian Web, in terms of both content restriction and access to websites (Faris and Villeneuve 2008). This goes far beyond simply blocking access to particular websites and services (Faris and Villeneuve 2008; MacKinnon 2013). After the 2009 Green Movement protests, "increasingly complex surveillance and monitoring techniques, complementing technical filtration tools with legal frameworks and information manipulation" were adopted by the government (Open Net Initiative 2013). The co-optation of the core Internet infrastructure itself by the Iranian government in the aftermath of the disputed 2009 elections, in order to exert large scale Internet censorship, has also been documented (Bailey and Labovitz 2011).

Open Net Initiative testing "has revealed consistent filtering of websites pertaining to social media, international news channels, non-Shi'ite religions, social and religious taboos, and anything remotely opposed to official government policies" (Open Net Initiative 2013). According to the results of a survey conducted on the websites most visited by Iranian users (based on Alexa web traffic ranking), the most censored category appeared to be adult websites (more than 95 percent of them are blocked), followed by society and news (Aryan, et al. 2013). Another study of inaccessible entries of Persian-language Wikipedia in Iran found that blocked pages are mostly those with socio-political or sexual content. Other themes that are blocked in the Persian Wikipedia are religious matters, human rights issues, the arts, media and journalism, and academia (Nazeri and Anderson 2013).

Despite the comprehensive and sophisticated filtering system in Iran (Open Net Initiative 2009), a thorough study of the Iranian Web shows large numbers of highly responsive Iranian websites (i.e., blocked sites are still functioning) (Rogers, et al. 2012). It has also been discovered that the Iranian web is fresh (i.e., sites have been recently updated). Moreover, the appearance of blocked blogs demonstrates that the Iranian web has an active “censorship circumvention culture” (ibid). Monitoring is accepted by users as what ordinarily happens. Studies show that ordinary users, and even civil society bloggers and dissident news readers, either ignore or adapt to the possibility of being monitored by the government during their online activities (Abadpour and Anderson 2013). Moreover, while a majority of the Iranian users often encounter blocked websites, most of them have heard about tools that help circumvent blocked websites, and they have easy access to such tools (Wojcieszak and Smith 2014). The recent national survey of Iranian youth values showed that 69.3 percent of youth Internet users use web proxies, or other tools, to bypass filtering (Iranian Student’s News Agency 2014). In fact, despite the disruption of access to the Internet, users are not persuaded to abandon their activities (Abadpour and Anderson 2013) and the filtering does not have any influence on users’ access to the demanded websites (Rasouli and Moradi 2012).

The fact that the use of circumvention tools is widespread inside Iran undermines the premise that filtering plays a key role in leading users to use unfiltered forums. Unfiltered forums and websites are still very popular on their own merits. The huge number of users of unfiltered forums- for example, cloob.com (2,000,000 users), Tebyan (222,000 users), and FaceNama (approximately 500 thousand users)-, together with the fact that accessing filtered forums and websites is not necessarily difficult, indicates that unfiltered forums host content and issues that is of real interest to users.

In summary, the existing literature indicates that there is a wide and diverse range of Internet users who are active in the Iranian online spheres despite governmental control of the infrastructure and massive filtering.

Online activities and online spheres

This section discusses the activities, issues of interest, and demographics of Iranian Internet users. My review of recent studies on Iranian Internet users’

activities suggests that the blogosphere, social networking sites (hereafter SNS), and news and information sources are the three main online spheres that Iranian Internet users are actively engaged in and that studies have been conducted on. Each is discussed below.

Blogosphere

The first Iranian weblog was created on September 2001. Two months later, the second and third Persian weblogs (editor-myself.com and i.hoder.com) were launched by a young Iranian journalist (Sreberny and Khiabany 2010) who is known as the father of the Persian blogs. Since then the number of Persian blogs has rapidly increased. The main reasons for the growing popularity of Iranian blogs are the low cost and flexibility of labor, which makes blogs desirable to users (ibid). Blogging, between 2003 and 2008 was at its height (Akhavan 2013). In the end of this period, according to Kelly and Etling, the Persian blogosphere was a large discussion sphere of approximately 60 thousand routinely updated blogs (2008).

There is a dominant account that Iranian blogosphere contributed to the opening up of society by enabling a political voice, particularly to Iranian youths during the last decade (Bucar and Fazaeli 2008). However, the very account, which characterizes Iranian blogosphere as primarily a political and politicized space, overlooks the diversity of issues and views that are discussed and shared (Akhavan 2013). Although most studies have only been carried out on political weblogs (e.g. Golkar, 2005; Jansen, 2009), among the contents of Iranian blogs Sreberny and Khiabany distinguished five categories in the Iranian blogosphere: personal diaries, intellectual debates, literature, politics, and photo-blogs (2010).

Three studies have intensively and quantitatively examined this diverse areas of interest of Iranian blogosphere, and thus shed light on the primary concerns of Iranian bloggers: (1) an online survey of 1,049 green movement activists in February 2013 (Honari, et al. 2014), (2) an online survey of 2,800 Iranian youth in January-February 2012 (Wojcieszak and Smith 2014), and (3) the mapping of the Iranian blogosphere using computational social network and content analysis (Kelly and Etling 2008).

In the online survey of the Green Movement supporters conducted by Honari et al. (2014) before and after the 2013 presidential election, respondents were

asked whether they had their own blog. Of the 1,051 respondents, 366 (35 percent) answered “yes.” The blog owners were then asked what issues were among the main concerns of their blog posts. As can be seen from Table 1, even supporters of the Iranian prodemocracy Green Movement use blogosphere to express a wide variety of concerns and issues; not limited to political issues.

	Response	%
Society	239	65%
Political issues	177	48%
Art and literature	152	42%
Diaries	151	41%
Economic issues	73	20%
Religious issues	66	18%
Science and technology	39	11%
Entertaining issues	22	6%
Sport	11	3%
Others (please indicate)	44	12%

Table 1. Main concern of blog posts (Honari, van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2014).

* Note: Others include: women's issues 3, human rights 2, war 1, cooking 1, education 2, personal 5, romance 1, photo 1, cinema 1, syndicate issues 1, environmental issue 1, History 3, Linguistic 2, short story 1, trip 1, minimal stories 2, other 16.

** Note: the percentages do not add up to 100 percent as respondents could select more than one issue.

Respondents of the survey conducted by Wojcieszak and Smith (2014) reported that they read blogs to get information about science and IT (61.7 percent), news (44.2 percent), and work (43.5 percent); furthermore, they write blogs to discuss science (39.1 percent), personal issues (32.7 percent), and work (27.7 percent); finally, they comment on blogs discussing science

(44.4 percent), social issues (31.9 percent), and news (30.5 percent). It's important to note in this case that the respondents were recruited via a file-sharing platform, 4shared.com, and thus were mostly young and technologically savvy. Table 2 shows the results of the Wojcieszak and Smith survey regarding bloggers' interests.

	Writing blog	Reading blog
Science & IT	39.1%	61.7%
Personal	32.7%	31.6%
Work	27.7%	43.5%
Social	27.0%	37.0%
Religion	24.8%	40.7%
News	16.6%	44.2%
Health	14.4%	20.8%
Culture	9.8%	29.2%
Foreign affairs	9.5%	31.3%
Community	9.0%	22.2%
Economy	4.0%	10.5%
Sport	7.7%	22.8%
Lifestyle	6.5%	21.6%
Gender	3.2%	10.2%

Table 2. Percentage of respondents discussing various issues through blogs. Summary of findings. (Wojcieszak and Smith 2014, 99).

Using computational social network mapping, as well as human and auto-

mated content analysis, Kelly and Etling (2008) found four main categories of issues that are discussed in the blogosphere: politics and public affairs, Islam/religion, personal life, and topical issues. They also found a number of subcategories, such as international news, domestic policies, economy, leaders, women's rights, the Quran, theology, personal experience, Islamic revolution, religious poetry, personal life, single life, family life, Iran/Iraq war, poetry, literature, technology, and Western culture. They illustrate that these topics are discussed in four major networks (secular/reformist, conservative/religious, Persian poetry and literature, mixed networks).

Golkar (2005), using content analysis to explore the political culture of Iranian blogosphere, found that 92 percent of sampled political blogs are against the government, though this finding has been questioned by Kelly & Etling (2008) and Akhavan (2013). Contrary to conventional wisdom, Kelly and Etling (2008) demonstrated a considerable cluster of conservative/religious bloggers that support Ahmadinejad. More interestingly, they reported that this cluster in the Iranian blogosphere had expanded as the presidential election approached (Kelly and Etling 2009).

The idealized view of Iranian bloggers as secular prodemocracy political dissidents is consistent with the typical portrayal of Iranian blogosphere in Western media which is mostly made by diasporic bloggers. As St-Louis argues "[t]his portrayal supported by factions of Iranian bloggers outside of Iran presents a perspective of Iranian society that is close to Western standards while being critical of the Islamist government of Iran" (2010). The discourses around gender, women's rights and sexuality issues --which are frequently discussed in a considerable number of blogs (Sreberny and Khiabany 2010)-- are also primarily shaped by participation of the Iranian diaspora in the blogosphere (Shakhsari 2011).

Although a portion of Iranian blogs and oppositional blogging are severely repressed by the government, blocked blogs continue to respond and remain fresh (Rogers, et al. 2012). According to Rogers and colleagues (2012), Iranian websites are healthy overall. Table 3 shows the characteristics of the top ten blog service providers in Iran.

Blog provider	Global Alexa rank	Alexa rank in Iran	# blogs/blogger	Total pages across blogs (million)
Blogfa.com	187	3	4.71	50
Mihanblog.com	427	5	3.25	18.7
Persianblog.ir	572	6	2.64	9.3
Blogsky.com	1045	13	2.56	3.8
Persianguig.com	2473	38	2.72	0.715
Parsiblog.com	2525	34	1.93	8.29
Iranblog.com	3213	55	2.58	1.1
Rozblog.com	4461	71	3.06	5
Parsfa.com	5582	78	1.7	0.817
Loxblog.com	7939	123	2.9	4.53

Table 3. Characteristics of the top ten blog service provider in Iran (Naghavi and Sharifi 2013).

It should be mentioned that Iranian blogosphere is not based primarily on dialogue. Instead, it deals mainly with production, rather than knowledge exchange or the sharing of opinions (Rabiei, et al. 2013). Bloggers hardly respond to each other's posts, and the number of comments on posts is very few. This fact has also been documented for SNSs (Yazdkhasti, et al. 2013), although a recent study shows that commenting on SNSs is more frequent than on blogs (Giacobino, et al. 2014). For political blogs, the lack of communication between blogs, and blog readers and bloggers is more tangible. One study on the Iranian blogosphere relating to online activism, using digital methods and mapping the issue networks of twenty Iranian blogger activists, concluded that the activist network is not densely connected in comparison to the Tunisian and Egyptian activist networks (Jansen 2009). Wojcieszak and Smith's findings also show that "even though the

respondents read blogs about news and current events, foreign affairs or the economy, these topics were far less popular when it comes to commenting the blogosphere” (2014).

Wojcieszak, Smith, and Enayat (2012) have shown that a considerable portion of Iranian Internet users are engaged in writing (8 percent), reading (42 percent), or commenting on (18 percent) blogs. However, a recent claim has surfaced that the blogosphere is declining with the rise of micro blogging, social news aggregators, and SNS’s (St-Louis 2010).

Social Networking Sites (SNSs)

Over 85 percent of Internet users in Iran access SNSs such as Facebook and Google+ (Tabnak 2012). Social networking is the most significant activity that Iranian Internet users are engaged in (Abadpour and Anderson 2013). According to Alexa, SNSs accessible in Iran, such as Facenama.com (rank: 7/ users: 435,000), aparat.com (rank: 16), cloob.com (rank: 18/ users: more than 850,000), and Tebyan.net (rank 28/ users: 222,000) are among the most popular and frequently visited websites in Iran. The main international platforms for social networking that are blocked in Iran are Facebook and YouTube. The most popular one is Facebook. In terms of the demographics of users, a study on a national social network, Parsi-yar (78,000 users), shows that most of its users are young, students, and - unlike most international SNSs - mostly male (Esmaeili, et al. 2011).

Some suggest a categorization of online SNSs as either accessible or blocked in Iran. This categorization does not imply, however, that the only factor conducive to choosing a SNS is filtering, considering that the circumvention of blocked websites is easy and widespread among Iranian users. A recent study inside Iran shows that the level of satisfaction between sample groups of Facebook users and cloob users is the same. There is no significant relationship between other users’ characteristics, such as age, gender or Internet usage and satisfaction, in both forums, except that religious users are more satisfied with cloob and politically radical users are more satisfied with Facebook (Mahmoudi 2011). Another comparative study reveals that Iranian using an international SNSs (Facebook and Google+) are more likely to post a photo of themselves than those using a national SNSs (Cloob.com

and Facenama) (Naghibulsadat, et al. 2015). These findings confirm that users choose different SNSs for pursuing different interests and discussing different issues.

A study conducted in Tehran, through face-to-face interviews with 18- to 30-year-old active users of SNSs, shows that strengthening and expanding social ties, expressing views and opinions, information seeking and information giving are among the main motives of Tehrani youth for using SNSs (Shahabi and Bayat 2012). Another study among students of one university in a smaller city, Birjand University of Medical Sciences, shows that communication with old friends is the most important reason to use SNSs (Erfanian, et al. 2013). The survey of 2,800 young, educated, metropolitan, and technologically savvy Iranians conducted in 2011 found that personal issues and IT/science were more often discussed via social networks than politics within this group (Wojcieszak and Smith 2014).

However, when Iranian society is politicized SNSs as well as blogs and news websites are used more widely and effectively for political purposes (Akhavan 2013; Dabashi 2010). After the disputed Iranian presidential election in June 2009, SNSs played an important role in mobilizing people, sharing ideas and spreading information among Green Movement supporters (Baldino and Goold 2014; Honari 2013; Rahimi 2011b; Rasouli and Moradi 2012), and also in “catching global media attention and raising human rights concerns” (Sohrabi-Haghighat and Mansouri 2010). The Iranian diaspora also employed social media to influence international media coverage as well as to “disrupt hegemonic narratives about Iran [in the West] and articulate Iranian identities” (Alexanian 2011). Using SNSs in Iran for political purposes is not limited to any particular political views (Abadpour and Anderson 2013). Conservative activists and hardliners increasingly utilize blogging (Akhavan 2013; Golkar 2011; Kelly and Etling 2009) and employ SNSs such as Facebook, Google+ and Afsaran for political purposes (Akhavan 2013; Golkar 2015).

A major study on Iranian social networks identified a considerable number of popular, accessible SNSs in Iran, with user numbers ranging from 850,000 to 50,000, such as: cloob.com (>850,000), Tebyan.net (222,000), Aparat.com, Facenama.com (435,000), delshekasteh.com (77,500), Baha-nehha.net (63,000), Hamkelasiha.com (46,500), and Google+ (12 percent

of Iranian Internet users). Nevertheless, most studies on SNSs in Iran have been carried out on international SNSs which are mostly blocked in Iran. The existing literature is mostly dealing with Twitter (Burns and Eltham 2009; Elson, et al. 2012; Kavanaugh, et al. 2011; Rogers 2009; Zhou, et al. 2010), Facebook (Asghar-kia and Nouri-Moradabadi 2012; Kashani and Zarea 2012; Mahmoudi 2011; Rahimi 2011a), and Balatarin (Bandari, et al. 2013; Rostami 2013).

Twitter

During the post-election mass street demonstrations, some Western media explained the movement's character as a media phenomenon mainly related to Twitter, sometimes even calling the movement the "Twitter Revolution."⁴ Although scholars (Aday, et al. 2010; Esfandyari 2010; Honari 2013; Rahimi 2011b) stress that Twitter was hardly used by Iranian citizens in the midst of the 2009 protests, several studies in the West (Burns and Eltham 2009; Elson, et al. 2012; Fisher 2010; Kavanaugh, et al. 2011; Rogers 2009; Zhou, et al. 2010) have been carried out on the Twitter data from Iranian Green movement. Moreover, some scholars drew incorrect conclusions: for instance, Kavanaugh and colleagues (2011) worked with Twitter data from Iran, Tunisia and Egypt. They claimed that the use of Twitter via cellphones was important in the midst of the demonstrations because it enabled protestors in the streets to share information on police presence to save their lives. This conclusion was drawn despite the number of mobile Internet subscribers being negligible in Iran in 2009. GPRS service began at the end of 2008, and in the beginning it was just for a limited number of Internet users in Tehran. With the subscription of Internet users in the provinces, which began in January 2010, the number of users with access to mobile broadband Internet reached 0.1 percent of Internet users at the end of 2010 (Statistical Center of Iran 2011). The "active mobile- broadband subscriptions" in 2010 in Iran is reported by the International Telecommunication Union as 0.0 (2011). These findings reveal that, in the heydays of the protests in 2009, the number of people who could access the Internet via their mobile phones was too few to ascribe impact to Twitter.

Moreover, as was noted by another expert (Esfandyari 2010), the vast majority of the tweets regarding Iran were in English. 'For the ppl of Iran #iranelection RT' is a project that investigated the tweets that have been

tagged #iranelection from June 10-30, 2009, during the heated days of the election and post-election (Rogers 2009). The findings of the project demonstrate that the number of tweets in #iranelection in English (612,373) was about a hundred times more than in Persian (6,248); it is highly unlikely that Iranian protesters in Iran coordinated the protests in any language other than Farsi. Above all, Internet access by mobile phones was not possible during the street protests; during these days all mobile services such as SMS, GPRS, and MMS were blocked by the government.⁵ A study on the tweets published since three months before till 15 months after the 2009 elections demonstrates that active users emerged after the elections and Twitter played a role solely in globalizing the movement (Tabatabaei and Asadpour 2015).

Twitter still is not widely used by Iranians. Empirical studies demonstrate that Twitter is in fact the least prevalent online forum used by general population and youth (Wojcieszak, et al. 2012). However, it can be predicted that, through the use of the Internet via mobile phones, Twitter will become popular in Iran. Despite having a limited number of users, Twitter is popular among journalists, young activists and campaigners and the Iranian diaspora. Twitter is even used by pro-government activists to discuss political issues (Marchant, et al. 2014).

Facebook

Facebook is the most popular SNS among Iranian users. One study on Facebook (n=500) shows that user penetration in Tehran is 12.3 percent. Users are mostly between 20 and 24 years of age (3.8 percent), male (7.1 percent), and highly educated (11.3 percent). They use Facebook mostly to communicate with friends, and the majority of them use their real name (Kashani and Zarea 2012). According to research on a sample of 750 highly educated Internet users in 2012, 58 percent had a Facebook account (CHIMIGI 2012). Students use Facebook more than other social groups in Iran. A recent survey of social communication students in four main Tehran universities (n=325) found that the vast majority (92.3 percent) use SNSs, particularly Facebook (Rasouli and Moradi 2012).

The respondents in this survey reported using Facebook for obtaining information and news, dating, communicating with friends, and discussing

political and social issues. They rarely use Facebook for academic purposes. What they share and post includes social, political, cultural, and entertaining contents (ibid). Another study among students in Tehran (n=396) reveals that sharing information and news (39.1 percent) and free communication (34.6 percent) are among the most important motivations of users on Facebook in Iran (Asghar-kia and Nouri-Moradabadi 2012). According to an online survey of 188 Iranian Facebook users, the three most shared topics by Facebook users are personal thoughts and opinions, cultural, and societal/civic issues, while the most followed topics are societal/civic issues, domestic politics, domestic news and current events. The least frequently shared and followed topics are religion and health. Other issues that are moderately followed and shared are everyday life, professional issues, community issues, economy, science/It, foreign affairs, gender, environment, sports, and international politics (Iran Media Program 2014).

Facebook in Iran represents an emerging forum for a new kind of activism (Rahimi 2011a). Very close to the disputed 2009 presidential election, "Facebook rapidly expanded into a political forum" (Rahimi 2011a). Then, in the midst of post-election protests, Facebook was extensively employed by Green Movement activists for mobilization (Honari 2013) and "online broadcasting of offline events" (Rahimi 2011b). Users' behavior on some Facebook pages regarding Iranian Green Movement has been used as an indication and predictor of off-line protests, as well (Cross 2010). The quantitative study by Cross (2010) found a causal effect of "like" or comments on Mousavi's Facebook page - the leader of the Iranian Green Movement- on protest activities on the streets of Tehran. Using Facebook as a platform for the mobilization attempts of Green Movement activists was also actively encouraged by Facebook itself (MacKinnon 2013). However, it also be employed by conservatives. In the midst of the 2013 presidential elections, Facebook was considerably used for electoral campaigning by supporters of the most hard-line candidate, Saeid Jalaili (Golkar 2015).

Balatarin

One of the most well-known social news aggregator websites in Iran is "Balatarin" (Alexa Global Rank in 2014: 3215). On Balatarin, which is similar to digg.com, users submit the best links of interest to other (Iranian) Internet users around the world. Once a link acquires enough positive votes, it

is moved to the top of the front page (hot posts' page). Balatarin has about 35 thousand users and half a million visitors per month (in 2012). Users are active in seven categories: society, politics, science/ technology, sports, art/ literacy, entertainment, and economy. "Balatarin, an aggregator of blog and news content," according to its founder, is "where the postings are prioritized by the voting of its members, [and] used to amplify the voice of the bloggers" (Yahyanejad 2010). During the 2009 post-election protests, Balatarin was one of the most influential Iranian social networks for the Iranian Green Movement (Honari 2013; Sreberny and Khiabany 2010). Although the political behavior and discussion of Balatarin's users has attracted the attention of several researchers (Asadpour 2012 [by governmental security and intelligence concerns]; Bandari, et al. 2013; Rostami 2013), other domains of Balatarin remain unexplored.

LinkedIn

A well-known international platform for professional social networking is LinkedIn, with an audience of 12 percent of Iranian Internet users. There are also a number of non-filtered online SNSs that are used for professional purposes inside Iran (e.g. doreh.com and u24.com). However, a study of ten professional SNSs accessible inside Iran⁶ found these platforms are neither very successful nor large in contrast to the international options. Apart from problems such as the lower quality of these websites as a reason for their less frequent usage, it seems that using a non-Iranian platform for knowledge sharing and professional experience exchange is more common and popular among Iranian users (Anbari 2011).

News Websites

News websites, and recently newspaper portals, in addition to SNSs, are widely used to obtain news and information. According to the BBG 2012 report, in addition to emails, the Internet is largely used for accessing news and information. The Internet for 13 percent of Iranians is the main platform for accessing daily news and information (Gallup/BBG 2012). Another survey in four major metropolitan cities in Iran reports that for 26 percent of respondents, the Internet is the most important source of information (Wojcieszak, et al. 2012). With regard to regular Internet activities

and consumption in Iran, a survey of 750 Iranian respondents in 2012 showed that users use the Internet for several purposes including researching information (67 percent), reading news websites (65 percent), online banking (64 percent), downloading music (49 percent), social networking (44 percent), and shopping online (43 percent) (Social Media in Iran 2012).

Research conducted among students of four Tehran universities reveals that the most important purpose of using SNSs is for obtaining information and news (Rasouli and Moradi 2012). The students reported that they are highly interested in sharing literary quotes, films, daily news, entertaining issues, and photos. Among these individuals, they are most interested in posting and sharing daily news (ibid).

Conclusion and implications for future online social research

This review leads to the following concluding remarks on online social research in Iran:

1. There is a substantial need to provide a bigger picture and vision of the Iranian web. So far, (a) little attention has been paid to the non-political and indirectly political forums of the Iranian web, and (b) there is a lack of research on the SNSs provided and used inside Iran (unfiltered SNSs), such as Tebyan, cloob, despite their widespread popularity.
2. Although the Internet draws a remarkable attention for facilitating political participation of individuated citizens (Bennett and Segerberg 2013) particularly in closed societies (Howard 2011), it offers broader venues and forums for engagement in society as opposed to only political venues. Online nonpolitical protests, consumer-based collective claim making, culturally oriented petitions, and boycotting are as widespread as online political protests (Earl and Kimport 2009). The growing number of indirectly political activities taking place online has a substantial impact on offline activities. Unfortunately, the literature is focused on the explicitly political behavior of online issues and overlooked such important indirectly political activities and discussions.

3. There is not necessarily a significant difference in the beliefs, demographics, and other characteristics of users of unfiltered and filtered SNSs, but there may be a significant difference of interests. A part of the imbalance in research on international and national SNSs (Akhavan 2013) stems from the availability of tools for gathering and analyzing data from international SNSs such as Facebook and Twitter. Greater efforts are needed to provide tools to facilitate data gathering from national SNSs and subsequently research on national (unfiltered) SNSs.

4. The primary online spheres of the Iranian web in which Iranian users discuss their issues of concern and interest are categorized into three: the blogosphere, social networking sites (SNSs) and news websites. For studies aiming to obtain information on “ordinary” Iranians, the blogosphere and SNSs - whose contents are created largely out of bottom up processes -- will provide the optimal arenas of study while news sites tend to be designed primarily to push information out in a top-down manner. However, comment sections of news websites are increasingly becoming places for users’ participation and discussion of common issues and concerns spurred by news articles. This users’ commenting behavior and the content generated by users on online news media would be a fruitful area for further Iranian online social studies.

5. Iranian Internet users are diverse in terms of their views and interests, and a wide range of concerns and topics are discussed on the Iranian web. Users, for example, are not uniformly politicized, nor are they simply anti-government. When severe repression against political reform was sustained for a long period of time, one way of adaptation to that repression was shifting from offline to online activities (For the case of women’s rights activists see: Abbasgholizadeh 2014). Yet, the most frequently discussed topics in SNSs still are personal, cultural, societal, and science issues. Less frequently discussed topics include domestic and international politics. As noted above, this leads scholars of Iranian online social media to use a sampling plan that begins by capturing a broad population via a range of forums

and platforms. With most of the relevant sites, researchers enable a fine-grained examination of topics, and avoid the bias inherent in searching for pre-determined keywords.

6. The studies reviewed provide evidence that there is a lack of exchange and dialogue in the Iranian Web. It will therefore be more useful to focus on themes, discourses and issues to extract Iranian Internet users' interests and concerns, than to attempt to analyze hyperlinks and comments (as for example Kelly and Etling 2008 do), as these are likely to provide much less information.

7. All of the studies reviewed here support the view that the government filtering system in Iran failed to block the user's access to the demanded contents. Internet users in Iran frequently and easily use circumvention tools to bypass filtering. This raises the issue of the theoretical drawback of online social research in Iran. The widespread circumventing culture among Iranian users challenges the theories and approaches that put online repressive measures into the center of attention of studies attempting to understand Iranian Internet users as well as Iranian society. So far, studies have tended to equalize repression with structural constraints imposed by government and neglect the alternatives that individuals face in response to repression. Future studies could usefully explore how people cope or deal with repression (Linden and Klandermans 2006), rather than how repression affects individuals' behavior particularly political participation.

Taken together, the findings of this review will serve as a base for the design of further online research on the Iranian Web. The review calls online social researchers' attention to uncharted areas of Iranian Web. The Internet in Iran is an interesting and puzzling case not only for scholars of political communication and social movements who engage in the role of Internet in democratization (Howard 2011; Rogers 2013) but also a broader category and of scholars and scientists who seek to understand Iranian society through the lens of the Internet. Yet, as Earl (2013) pointed out, sampling design, including sampling frame (i.e. identifying cases at risk of being studied) and sampling method (i.e. how cases from the sampling frame are drawn), is crucial for online studies.

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Notes

¹ Penetration Rate Portal: <http://www.iri.u.ir/matma/>

² Great variation in statistics is mainly resulted from the different methods used to measure Internet penetration as well as different definitions of Internet users in different studies.

³ This is a way if Internet users try to gain access to a blocked URL, a “block page” comes up instead, delivering a warning to the user that access is forbidden.

⁴ For some instances, see: The Washington Times, editorial on June 16, 2009 (Iran’s Twitter revolution 2009) and Foreign Policy in Focus on June 17, 2009 (Quirk 2009).

⁵ Reports of blocking attempts of the Internet services on mobile phones by the government can be seen across the reports of protest days. For instance see:

Aftabnews (15-06-2009) “mobile phones was cut off in Tehran,” retrieved from <http://bit.ly/1c9ShZA>

Tabnak (08-07-2009) “Since yesterday, services such as SMS, GPRS, and MMS has been cut off,” retrieved from <http://bit.ly/OEiy82>

BBC Persian (07-09-2009) Protests in student day in Iran, retrieved from <http://bbc.in/Mv47O>

Tabnak (19-09-2009) “Pervasive interruption in the Internet connections,” retrieved from <http://bit.ly/1hAsFD9>

Deutsche Welle Farsi (4-11-2009) “The early hours of Wednesday, coinciding with the start of the rally in the streets of the capital, Tehran, mobile phones transmission in some areas was cut off and in some areas also faced with severe interruptions.” retrieved from <http://bit.ly/1mDjt3R>.

⁶ Websites include: cloob.com, Network of Iranian students and professors (doreh.com), Iranian experts (irexpert.ir), social network of Iranian experts (u24.ir), nafa.ir, webzzz.ir, mypardis.com, iek.ir, Virtual forum of Iranian music (noteahang.com), www.iran.ir.

Arab Iranians and Their Social Media Use

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Abstract:

Arab Iranians have a special status in Iran and the Middle East. Due to their Arab origins, they are sometimes viewed as the “other” for being different from ethnic Persians, while many Arab countries regard them as the “other” as well perceiving them as being Iranians more than Arabs. This study investigates the media landscape and conflict that is linked to the Ahwazi Arabs with special attention given to social media use. The study argues that Iranian Arabs are used as pawns by two of the regional players in the Middle East – Iran and Saudi Arabia. Within such an analogy, Ahwaz is regarded as a chessboard where geopolitics is continuously played with the systematic and well-planned use of media channels. The examination of social media outlets that are related to Arab Iranians shows that they are either pro-Sunni or pro-Shiite. The results indicate that there are very few followers and fans from Iran especially for the Arab Iranians’ anti-government channels, while Shiite SNS outlets—particularly those originating from Iran—garner more followers from inside Iran.

Keywords:

Islam, social media, Internet, shia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Internet studies

Introduction

This article deals with social media use of Arab Iranians. It is important first to provide a historical and contextual overview that can better explain the results and implications of this study. In general, media use and production are some of the main ways of expressing religious and political views and different types of activism as well as highlighting injustice, grievances, and the shortcomings of the political and religious system. This type of media use is applicable to Arab Iranians who generally experience a sense of marginalization and exclusion from the mainstream culture due to their collective Arab identity. In this study, two main social media outlets are identified in relation to Arab Iranians: pro-Shiite and pro-Sunni.

Indeed, Iran is an ethnically and culturally rich country where a large number of minorities speaking different languages live side by side. These groups can be classified based on their class, religion, and geographic locations (Abrahamian 1979; Beck 2014: 249). In terms of religious differences, Abrahamian observed that along with the majority Shiite population of Iran, there is also a significant Sunni minority that consists of various ethnic groups like Arabs, Turks, Baluchis, and Kurds. In addition, there are many other non-Muslim groups in Iran such as Jews, Zoroastrians, Armenians, and Assyrians. (1979: 389-390). As for other minorities classified based on language and ethnicity, they include many that live in Iran such as the Bakhtiari, Qashqayis, Lurs, Baluchis, Afshars, Kurds, Mamesenis, Azeris, Shahsavans, Assyrians, Gilakis, Taleshis, Mazandarani, Turkomans, Timurs, Tajiks, and Jamshidis (Abrahamian 1979: 389). However, there has been a growing tension between some ethnic minorities and the central government especially during Ahmedinejad's former rule because of his polarized policies that included his active and relentless promotion of Shiite Islam inside and outside Iran. In the northwest of the country, Iranian Turks rioted, while Baluchis killed some government officials. Further, Arab Iranians destroyed some oil pipelines, and Kurds attacked Iranian soldiers near the border between Turkey and Iran (Wood 2006). These types of tension are still felt in Iran today though they are less intense than before.

In this study, the focus is on Arab Iranians who mostly reside in Ahvaz (Persian spelling) or Ahwaz (Arabic spelling) city in Khuzestan province as well as in border areas neighboring Iraq. Ahvaz city has over 1.3 million residents and is located in Khuzestan province, and 70 percent of this province's residents have Arab origins ((Ahvaz Municipality 2015; Saleh 2013: 70). Due to a number of historical, religious, and political reasons, there is a vague tension felt by Arab Iranians toward Iran and the Arab world. This tension arises because they are sometimes viewed as not being "true Iranians" due to their secession demands (Tohidi 2009: 311), so they are seen as the other (Elling 2013: 165). This sentiment increased after the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980, when Saddam Hussein tried to monopolize them in order to weaken the Iranian government (Wright 1985). Several armed anti-Iranian movements supported by Iraq were created, some of which are cited below. Farhi includes Arab-Iranians as part of the "hyphenated Iranians" (2005), a type of hybrid Iranian, because of their combination of Arab and Persian language abilities and lineage. It is not exactly known

how many Arab Iranians live in Iran and abroad due to the lack of systematic and independent surveys, but it is estimated that there are between 1.3 to 5 million Arabs who are mostly Shiite (Keddie 1995: 12-13; Hassan 2007: 5; Elling 2013: 36) though there is a considerable Sunni presence especially in Hormozgan and Boshehr (Saleh 2013:70). As will be explained below, there is a general tension between Shiites and Sunnis in the rest of the Arab world and inside Iran itself which intensified after the 2003 invasion of Iraq. According to CIA estimates, 2 percent of the Iranian population speak the Arabic language (The World Factbook 2014). Arabic culture also manifests in different areas like the use of “traditional clothing and tattooing, folklore, poetry and proverbs, food, and music, as well as unique religious ceremonies and rituals” (Elling 2013: 36).

As indicated above, there has been some reported unrest involving Arab Iranians whose language and ethnicity define their resistance against the central Shiite government (Iskander 2011: 6). The main demands are related to ending ethnic discrimination against Arab Iranians by the majority Shiite government, providing adequate public and health services, distributing wealth evenly, and giving some freedom of speech. More nationalist groups regard the Iranian government as an occupier of their Arab lands which they call “Arabistan,” using the old term that was once in circulation before 1925. Ahwazi oppositional groups even use distinct national flags that symbolize their resistance against Persian influence (see Image 1).

Image 1. Different Ahwazi national flags.

Arab Iranians have a growing sense of grievance and injustice especially due to poverty, poor health services provided to them, and high unemployment rates (Elling2013: 70; Saleh 2013: 112). Indeed, these negative sentiments paved the way to several public protests. It is important to note here that most of these protests were encouraged by Arab Iranians living in the diaspora who run tens of anti-government associations, NGOs, and organizations that have active online presence. There is the National Organization for the Liberation of Ahwaz, which was established on the 15th of January 2010 in Cairo (arabistan.org), several others founded by Ahwazis living in UK such as the Democratic Solidarity Party of Alahwaz (alahwaz.info), and the Washington DC-based National Liberation Movement of Ahwaz (NLMA) (al-ahwaz.net). NLMA is linked to the 'National Assembly of Ahwaz' (ahwaz-parliament.com), the aims of which include: Liberate Ahwaz; establish an Ahwaz state; and work on the well being of Ahwazis. There is also allegation of foreign intervention in which Ahwazi Arabs are used to create unrest in Iran. For example, the famous US journalist, Seymour Hersh, claims that the CIA sent teams into Iran during its occupation of Iraq in order to encourage ethnic tribes to revolt against the Iranian central government (Hersh 2006). It is difficult to verify such claims because of the covert nature of these intelligence operations.

As mentioned above, a large number of protests have been organized by Arab Iranians who are mostly Sunni as will be shown below in the discussions. For example, activists demonstrated for three days in Ahwaz city between 15-18 April 2005. It is believed that the protests were caused by a letter allegedly written and signed by an Iranian official stating the need to reduce the number of Arab Iranians in Khuzestan. The news on the letter was covered by Al-Jazeera Arabic channel, but Iranian authorities insisted it was forged (The Economist 2005). During these protests, a series of

bombs exploded in Ahwaz; the military wing of the so-called Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahwaz claimed responsibility for the attacks (BBC 2006). As a result, the Iranian government cracked down on the protesters which allegedly resulted in 23 killed and 500 injured people as well as over 250 arrests (UNPO 2005). Most of those detained were under 20 years old (Samii 2005). Activists called this event Bloody Friday or the Day of Fury; this day has been commemorated in subsequent years with more protests and anti-government activities.

The Iranian regime blamed the UK for the unrest as its forces were stationed in Basrah city in southern Iraq at that time (Al Jazeera 2006; Press TV 2012), and it banned Al-Jazeera Arabic channel from reporting inside the country because they had published the letter that was believed to have ignited the unrest (Samii 2005). A couple of months later, seven bombs exploded in Ahwaz city just before the election day, killing 10 and wounding 80 people. This time the Iranian authorities blamed members of the former Baath Party in Iraq for what they referred to as “terrorists attacks” (Fathi 2005). In a report published in 2011 the April 15 Youth Movement estimated that about 15 Ahwazis had been killed since the beginning of the protests back in 2005 (Al-Arab 2011). In January 2006, a double bombing in Ahwaz city killed 8 people and injured about 46 others (Al Jazeera 2006).

In March 2006, the Iranian authorities publicly executed two Ahwazi activists for their role in the 2005 protests and bombings. In a televised confession, one of those two activists, Ali Afravi, mentioned that he had contacted Ahwazi separatists groups stationed in Canada and the UK after learning about them from their websites (BBC News2006). Other Ahwazi oppositional groups like the UK-based Popular Democratic Front of Ahwazi Arabs organized anti-government protests in March 2006, which also resulted in hundreds of arrests (Hassan 2007: 5). In April 2011, 12 Sunni Arab Iranians were killed by Iranian authorities as they were protesting and expressing the grievances felt by the Sunni minority in Iran. Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Dr. Shirin Ebadi sent a letter to the UN high commissioner for human rights, stating that “[i]n the 32 years’ history of the Islamic Revolution, Arabic-speaking Iranians have suffered from inequality and an extensive discrimination” (Dehghan 2011).

Finally, it seems that the sectarian tension that has engulfed the Middle East has not spared the Ahwaz area. In 2013, a gas pipeline was destroyed

in Iran by Arab Iranians who dedicated the attack to their Sunni rebels in Syria who are fighting the Alawite regime of Bashar Assad (Coles 2013).

The media role in a regional struggle

In order to better understand the role of media in the current sectarian tension in the Middle East, it is important to shed some light on the geopolitical struggle. Due to the sectarian divide between Sunnis and Shiites, Saudi Arabia has been active in leading the Sunni bloc in cooperation with several Arab countries like the UAE, Bahrain, and Kuwait. This is manifested in Saudi Arabia's military intervention in Bahrain where the Shiite majority revolted against the Sunni monarchy (Blight, Pulham and Torpey 2012). It is also evident in the latest attack against the Shiite Hawththis in Yemen during which Saudi Arabia was very critical of Iran for its alleged support for the Hawththi rebels. On the other hand, Shiite Iran has been leading a similar effort in protecting affiliate regimes like the Alawite government of Bashar Assad in Syria, Iraq's Shiite government in its anti-ISIS military campaigns, and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Iran has also expressed clear sympathy towards Shiite communities living in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.

In general, each religio-political bloc views the other side with suspicion, accusing them of creating chaos and mayhem in the region in order to control it. This attitude is also reflected in public opinion. In a 2014 poll, Arabs from various countries were asked "whether Iran contributes to peace and stability in the region" (Zogby 2014). 74-88 percent of Jordanians, Egyptians, Saudis and Emiratis "responded in the negative" especially in relation to Syria, Iraq, Bahrain and Yemen (ibid.). On the other hand, 98 percent of Iranians surveyed believed that their country "was playing a positive role in the Middle East and that their government's policies were having a positive impact on Iraq (77 percent), Syria (72 percent), Lebanon (68 percent), Bahrain (58 percent) and Yemen (52 percent)" (ibid.). In other words, there seems to be a large informational and ideological divide separating the Sunnis from Shiites as well as Arabs and Iranians in the Middle East.

In terms of the role of the media, Saudi Arabia has a media empire that includes tens of pan-Arab satellite channels and newspapers that are located in different capitals like London, Dubai, and Beirut. Arab journalists working for these Saudi-funded outlets are used as a means to protect and serve

Saudi interests as well as to exert more power and influence in the region (Atwan and Khazen 1996; Hafez 2004; Fandy2007: 43-44; Zayani 2012). Indeed, this kind of influence favors and sides with a Sunni Arab presence notwithstanding the media's relative secularity as opposed to a Shiite or Iranian-affiliated one (Al-Rawi 2013). In this regard, Saudi Arabia has been sponsoring some media channels that target Arab Iranians especially the Sunni minority due to sectarian connections. In one of the recently leaked Wikileaks Saudi cables dating back to 24 March 2012, a top secret document issued by the former Saudi Foreign Minister, Saud Al-Faisal, and addressed to the King's Special Secretary mentions the need to fund a media project approved by the Minister of Culture and Media. The proposal was originally submitted by the manager of Aoul (First) TV channel, Abdullatif Al-Dousari who runs his channel from Bahrain. It refers to the need to establish a Persian language TV channel that airs from Bahrain with English subtitles. The proposed name of this station is Hinijan, a term derived from a region in Arab Ahwaz, and its goal is to "counter "the critical media policies and false news that Iran disseminates through its satellite channels against Arab Gulf countries and Saudi Arabia in particular." Al-Faisal showed his strong support for the proposal and suggested financing the channel for two years after which an overall evaluation would be made. He also indicated the need to direct the channel "towards Shiites living the Gulf region" (Wikileaks 2015).

In a BBC Arabic documentary, it was revealed that Saudi Arabia funds a Persian language channel airing from London that targets Iranian Sunnis (BBC Arabic 2014). The channel, which is called Wesal Farsi (wesalfarsi-tv.co.uk), has a YouTube channel (youtube.com/user/Wisalfarsity) that are both run by Muntassar Malazadah who is known for his sectarian rhetoric. The Arabic version of this Saudi channel is also called Wesal TV since it is run by the same side (wesal.tv & tvwesal.com). It has a Farsi website, too (wesalhaq.tv/fa). The channel which broadcasts via Arabsat and Nilesat is also known for its Sunni inflammatory rhetoric; it airs a regular program called "The Forgotten Ahwaz" in which news about Ahwaz is highlighted, especially focusing on the malpractices of the Iranian government and the suffering of Ahwazis in Iran. The official Iranian government's English-language media channel, Press TV, which airs 24 hours and has offices and correspondents in many cities, once accused other Saudi channels, like the

pan-Arab TV channel, Al-Arabiya, of encouraging Ahwazis to rebel against the Iranian government (Press TV 2012).

On the other hand, the Iranian government has several channels that broadcast to the Middle East in Arabic and English such as Al-Alam TV, Al-Kowthar TV (Arabic), Press TV (English), and Sahar TV (English) (Kamalipour 2007). In particular, the Al-Alam (lit. 'the World') satellite channel has been routinely involved in a similar sectarian rhetoric in the Middle East. Al-Alam is a 24-hour Arabic channel that is financed and run by the Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB). It airs extended and brief newscasts that are compiled by over 50 correspondents stationed in 40 countries and has four main bureaus in Tehran, Baghdad, Beirut, and Damascus. The channel started broadcasting in February 2003 with the onset of the US-led invasion of Iraq (Al-Alam 2012). The timing of launching the channel seems to denote Iran's need to influence the public opinion in the Arab world and to communicate the Iranian official perspective toward important issues happening on the ground. From the beginning, Iranian authorities installed TV transmitters near the Iraqi border to guarantee that Al-Alam's airwaves reach a large segment of the Iraqi public (BBC 2006). During the US occupation of Iraq, the channel played an important role in emphasizing the number of civilian casualties as it called the conflict a "War of domination" and routinely referred to coalition forces as "occupiers" (BBC Monitoring 2003).

As for Al-Alam's sectarian Shiite rhetoric, the channel used to devote large segments of its newscasts and many other debate programs to the fighting between the Shiite Hawthis in Yemen and government forces as well as to the Shiite protests in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia; it is believed that 90 percent of Shiite Bahrainis watch Al-Alam channel because it voices their concerns (Sedarat 2011). During the Arab Spring, Al-Alam channel took sides similar to the Saudi-owned Al-Arabiya channel; hence, Iran was accused of hypocrisy for using double standards because it encouraged rebellion in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia but not in Syria and Iran (AFP 2011). As Sebastian Usher claims, Iran uses Al-Alam channel in order to "influence and stir up opinion in the Arab world and beyond - just as it tries to control the information available to its own people within the country" (Usher 2006). As a result, Al-Alam news coverage created a great deal of controversy in the Arab world which led to jamming its signals (Press TV 2011) and to the

decision of stopping its transmission on Nilesat and Arabsat on the 3rd of November 2010. Arabsat did allow the channel to resume broadcasting, yet it stopped its transmission for another time within a period of two months (Al-Alam 2010).

In relation to Iran's one-sided coverage, the case of the intentional mis-translation of the former Egyptian President's speech by the state-owned TV channel is one relevant example. In his speech, Muhammed Mursi mentioned during his only visit to Tehran "Syrian protests" but the channel aired it as "Bahraini protests" for more than once (AFP 2012). Similar to the Saudis, Iran is also involved in supporting media channels in the Arab world especially in Lebanon and Iraq where there are considerable Shiite presence. For example, a US cable from the Embassy in Baghdad cited Ibrahim al-Saraji, head of the Iraqi Journalist Rights Defending Association (IRJDA), and other journalists in November 2008 who claimed that they "perceived growing Iranian influence in Iraqi media and accused Iran of bribing journalists, making payments to media organizations, and implementing a strategy to infiltrate all news agencies" (Wikileaks 2008).

Internet and social media use in Iran

According to figures released by the Internet World Statistics in 2014, Iran has an Internet penetration of 55.7 percent which makes it little higher than the average penetration in the region (Internet World Stats 2014). This figure marks a great shift from 2011 during which Internet usage counted up to 16.6 percent of the population, constituting over 11 million people (Statistical Centre of Iran 2011: 28).

During the 2009 Green Revolution in Iran which occurred due to allegation of fraud and corruption during the general election, Twitter and Facebook became important tools for protesters (Featherman 2015). However and shortly after the general election, social media outlets were blocked in the country and the Committee Charged with Determining Offensive Content (CCDOC) was established (Advocacy 2014). CCDOC implemented several policies including the introduction of the so-called halal Internet which led to censoring YouTube (DW 2012). Yet, the Iranian authorities lifted the social media block in September 2013, which seemed to be only a glitch (Taylor 2013). In fact, numerous other reports indicate that social

media sites are still blocked in Iran despite the fact that many Iranian officials including President Hassan Rouhani have official Facebook and Twitter accounts (Advocacy 2013). A study conducted by Iranian authorities indicate that about 70 percent of young Iranians use VPN tools to bypass the censor and get access to the World Wide Web including social media channels. This glitch was also confirmed by the Iranian Minister of Culture, Ali Jannati, who once revealed to the Al Jazeera channel that “I think right now many Iranians are using Facebook Sooner or later this restriction must be lifted” (Al Jazeera 2014). When it comes to social media use, figures released by Alexa do not include Twitter and Facebook in the top 100 websites visited by Iranians (Alexa 2015); instead, there is another one that is called Facenama which offers chatrooms and discussion forums and seems to substitute some well-known SNS channels. Alexa’s figures correspond with the claim that Twitter and Facebook are both blocked in Iran, forcing Iranians to use illegal circumvention tools to access them.

Ahwazi media outlets and their social networking sites

In this study, we are going to focus on the geographic location of people retweeting or liking the Facebook pages of the different Ahwazi groups and media outlets. We believe this is an important indication whether these social media channels are drawing sympathizers and followers from inside Iran as a sign of online activism. In terms of the method, we used Crimson Hexagon commercial software in late April 2015 to retrieve data from Twitter which enabled us to examine historical data dating back to the 19th of December 2013. As for Facebook fans, we used the figures provided by Socialbakers which can be retrieved after an online registration on the website. Both of these tools have been used in previous studies on social media, but it is important to mention here that the figures provided below might not be completely accurate as many Iranians use special circumvention tools as stated above. Indeed, these special tools might make identifying the users’ geographical location very difficult.

Pro-Sunni SNS outlets

There are numerous social media outlets that are run by or for Ahwazi Arabs. There are also famous Twitter hashtags including “Ahwaz rebels” (#أحواز_تنقض) and “We’re all our Uprising in Ahwaz” (#كلنا_انتفاضة_أحوازنا) that document political resistance and activism against the Iranian regime.

Europe-based Muhammed Majid Al-Ahwazi is one of the most famous Ahwazi Sunni activists. Al-Ahwazi is closely connected to the Saudi government and has a program on the Saudi-run Al-Ahwaz TV, which is described in more detail below. Al-Ahwazi's Twitter account has over 270,000 followers (twitter.com/mohamadahwaze), and his feed highlights and chronicles the injustice inflicted against Ahwazi Arabs. According to data retrieved from Crimson Hexagon, we found that the highest number of Twitter followers based on who is retweeting comes from Saudi Arabia ($n=24897$) followed by Turkey ($n=5824$), USA ($n=1213$), Kuwait ($n=1196$), while Iran only comes in number 30 with 31 retweets (see Chart 1).

Chart 1. Locations of Muhammed Majid Al-Ahwazi's Twitter followers.

In relation to the top ten most retweeted posts for a period of one month (2015-04-01 to 2015-05-01), Table (1) shows that all the tweets are related to political activism of Arab Ahwazi even in the way they show solidarity with Saudi Arabia. For example, the first four tweets are all related to Saudi Arabia especially in relation to the football match that brought the Saudi team, Al-Hilal, to Ahwaz city. Many Iranian Arabs supported Al-Hilal team in the stadium instead of the Iranian club in order to show their solidarity with the Saudis. The second link to Saudi Arabia is found in the reference to supporting and praising the military campaign in Yemen, Al-Hazim Storm. It is important to mention here that the discourse used by Al-Ahwazi reflects his pro-Sunni ideological belief. For instance, he refers to Iran as Persia (pre-Islamic Iran) and categorizes it as the enemy, while Saudi Arabia is the friend.

Date	Sent Post	Post URL	Retweet Count
04/08/2015 18:12	The most popular images disseminated today in the Gulf were for the [Saudi football club] Al-Hilal from Al-Ahwaz. Thank you for Al-Hilal great fans!	http://twitter.com/MohamadAhwaze/status/585867703774248960	5223
04/08/2015 16:08	Thank you for Al-Hilal great fans!	http://twitter.com/MohamadAhwaze/status/585836573356331008	4022
04/03/2015 20:51	Al-Ahwaz shouts a few hours ago: [The Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen] Al-Hazim Storm, we're all with you. This is Al-Ahwazis' stance towards the battle of the nation, Al-Hazim Storm	http://twitter.com/MohamadAhwaze/status/584095843919204352	3555

04/07/2015 21:05	Before the beginning of Al-Hazim Storm, the Persians regarded the [Shiite] Houthis' advance towards Sanaa as an extension of the Iranian Revolution...This is how Tehran's streets looked like.	http://twitter.com/MohamadAhwaze/status/585549051527061504	3359
04/17/2015 11:06	The Ahwazis protests started in front of the European Parliament in Brussels... Please participate all of you in covering [and disseminating the news on] the protests	http://twitter.com/MohamadAhwaze/status/589022031137538048	2058
04/29/2015 14:26	From Al-Ahwaz we congratulate our people in Saudi Arabia for the new royaldecrees [on Yemen]. By Allah's will, Saudi Arabia will smash Persia's ambition in the region	http://twitter.com/MohamadAhwaze/status/593421136953761792	1940
04/18/2015 14:12	I hope that all thebrothers and sisters will participate in their retweets on the Ahwazis' Struggle conference that was held in the Hague. You're our voice amidst this lack of media coverage	http://twitter.com/MohamadAhwaze/status/589431191100588032	1810
04/01/2015 13:24	Are the Western and Arab media conspiring against Arabs and Sunnis? How would the media cover the event if Sunni sheikhs are forming military units?	http://twitter.com/MohamadAhwaze/status/583258533631795201	1426

04/03/2015 21:03	Hail the revolution in Ahwaz! Now, clashes occurring between Iranian security forces and protesters who are blocking the roads	http://twitter.com/MohamadAhwaze/status/584098803529216000	1370
04/18/2015 08:13	From the conference hall in the capital the Hague. I'll cover the conference live via Twitter. #theAhwazi Struggle Conference in the Hague	http://twitter.com/MohamadAhwaze/status/589340886179393536	1356

Table 1. The top ten most retweeted Al-Ahwazi's posts.

In the following paragraphs, we will examine some of the most popular Ahwazi Facebook and Twitter pages based on the number of followers and likes as it is impossible to survey every outlet.

One of the most famous Ahwazi media channels is called Al-Ahwaz satellite TV. This Saudi-run channel (ahwz.tv) broadcasts via Nilesat and Arab-sat. It has a YouTube channel (youtube.com/user/Ahwaztv) and a Facebook page (facebook.com/ahwazonatv) with 101,252 fans as well as a Twitter account (twitter.com/AhwazonaTV) with over 314 thousand followers. The main objective of this Saudi-funded channel is, according to Braude, to support "Ahwazi dissidents seeking to wage their own public information campaign, calling on Ahwazis to rise up against their rulers" (2012). This objective is very evident from the messages disseminated and rhetoric used in the channel, both being very sectarian and clearly anti-Shiite. Based on the statistics on Twitter, we find that most of the retweets are from Saudi Arabia (n=22640) followed by Turkey (n=5437) and Kuwait (n=1135), while Iran comes in number 27 with only 44 retweets (See Chart 2). This indicates that Al-Ahwaz TV has a few Twitter followers from Iran. As its Facebook page, we also find that Iran comes in the bottom with Egypt first

32 percent, followed by Iraq 10.2 percent, Algeria 7.9 percent, Morocco 7.7 percent, and Jordan 5.5 percent, whereas Iran only has 0.2 percent fans similar to Mauritania and Sweden.

Chart 2. Top 20 countries for retweets on 'Al-Ahwaz TV' (Saudi).

Table (2) shows the top ten most retweeted posts for a period of over one year (2013-12-19 to 2015-04-08). Highly sectarian discourse is used in the tweets as demonstrated by frequent use of the terms “Rawafidh” to describe Iranians—a term popular among Sunni salafi groups—and “Safavid” to describe the Iranian state itself—a term that references Iran’s Shiite past. Again, this Saudi-run channel places emphasis on showing the injustice and grievances of Arab Iranians—especially the Sunnis, while Shiite ceremonies and beliefs are not important.

Date	Sent Post	Post URL	Retweet Count
04/17/2015 11:06	The Ahwazis protests started in front of the European Parliament in Brussels... Please participate all of you in covering [and disseminating the news on] the protests	http://twitter.com/MohamadAhwaze/status/589022031137538048	2058
04/29/2015 14:26	From Al-Ahwaz we congratulate our people in Saudi Arabia for the new royaldecrees [on Yemen]. By Allah's will, Saudi Arabia will smash Persia's ambition in the region	http://twitter.com/MohamadAhwaze/status/593421136953761792	1940
04/18/2015 14:12	I hope that all thebrothers and sisters will participate in their retweets on the Ahwazis' Struggle conference that was held in the Hague. You're our voice amidst this lack of media coverage	http://twitter.com/MohamadAhwaze/status/589431191100588032	1810
04/01/2015 13:24	Are the Western and Arab media conspiring against Arabs and Sunnis? How would the media cover the event if Sunni sheikhs are forming military units?	http://twitter.com/MohamadAhwaze/status/583258533631795201	1426
04/03/2015 21:03	Hail the revolution in Ahwaz! Now, clashes occurring between Iranian security forces and protesters who are blocking the roads	http://twitter.com/MohamadAhwaze/status/584098803529216000	1370

Date	Sent Post	Post URL	Retweet Count
04/18/2015 08:13	From the conference hall in the capital the Hague. I'll cover the conference live via Twitter. #theAhwazi Struggle Conference in the Hague	http://twitter.com/MohamadAhwaze/status/589340886179393536	1356

Table 2. The top ten most retweeted Al-Ahwaz satellite TV's posts.

Another oppositional Ahwazi channel is called Al-Ahwaz voice that is run by the Arab Front for the Liberation of Ahwaz that was established in 1980 (alahwazvoice.com). This is an organization that was supported by Saddam Hussein's regime since the Iran-Iraq war began in the same year. However, its Twitter page (twitter.com/alahwazvoice) has 1,817 followers and Twitter data shows that there are very few retweets, coming mostly from Saudi Arabia (n=162) followed by Turkey (n=30) and only one from Iran (See Chart 3).

Chart 3. Top retweets for 'Al-Ahwaz Voice' (anti-government).

Another social media outlet is one that is affiliated with the Washington-based Ahwaz Human Rights Organization (AHRO) that was established in 1998 (ahwazhumanrights.org). As a well-known oppositional Iranian group, AHRO has another office in London. Its Facebook page has 3,158 fans (<https://www.facebook.com/ahwazhumanrights>). Based on the figures provided by Socialbakers, most of its fans are from Iraq (0.137 percent) followed by Egypt (0.103 percent), and Iran comes in number five (0.073 percent) (See Chart 4).

Chart 4. Facebook fans of 'Ahwaz Human Rights Organization'.

One Twitter account is affiliated with AHRO that is called "We Ask for Freedom" (twitter.com/tovfegh). This account is dedicated to supporting the Sunni Syrian rebels and Ahwazi activists especially that the sectarian conflict in the Middle East has extended by and far as indicated above. On this Twitter page, Iran is number 40 with 23 retweets originating from it (See Chart 5).

Chart 5. Retweets from 'Ahwaz Human Rights Organization' Twitter page.

Table (3) shows the top ten most retweeted posts based on the social media data 2014-08-15 to 2015-04-30. All the tweets are focused on Syria denoting the regional connection of Arab Iranians with their Sunni fellows. Also, all the tweets are written in English which suggest that the audiences are based outside Iran.

Date	Sent Post	Post URL	Retweet Count
01/10/2015 22:10	20,000 Children have been murdered in #Syria 100,000 Injured and maimed thousands left as orphans http://t.co/eWqAgjvc3n	http://twitter.com/tovfegh/status/554037606149681152	461
03/02/2015 00:20	If a billion people can see the color change in a dress why are they so blind to the color red in #Syria? #TheDress http://t.co/DxdxJOi5mk	http://twitter.com/tovfegh/status/572189620013801473	246
02/23/2015 00:59	#Syria n child protecting his little sister from #Assad's AirStrikes. Has to be one of the most heartbreaking Pic. http://t.co/oVqI7539Wk	http://twitter.com/tovfegh/status/569662736109404160	235
11/17/2014 23:49	#USA The silence of the Syrian children is a scream on deaf ears.. #Syria #SpeakUp4SyrianChildren #SaveSyrianChildren http://t.co/aAENZWzJwX	http://twitter.com/tovfegh/status/534493558250561536	176
02/05/2015 05:08	Can you feel the amount of fear and pain? Let be a "voice" not an "echo" Speak Up4 #Syria http://t.co/gowauW0baQ	http://twitter.com/tovfegh/status/563202414430269441	171
01/23/2015 21:15	#children in #Syria continue to die but the world pretends not to see #USA #AssadsWarOnChildren #Obama http://t.co/iacKLTVPsh	http://twitter.com/tovfegh/status/558734881509736448	171

Date	Sent Post	Post URL	Retweet Count
01/25/2015 07:44	Their mom was killed when #Assad forces dropped a TNT barrel on their home #Syria #RT Let be a “voice” not an “echo” http://t.co/UeIADrLwoj	http://twitter.com/tovfegh/status/559255598047318016	163
03/08/2015 10:54	#HappyWomensDay From #Syria http://t.co/s4zwuqgoQu	http://twitter.com/tovfegh/status/574523653062328320	156
01/29/2015 23:51	pain is usually felt, but in this picture you can actually see it .pain full pain #RT Let be a “voice” not an “echo” http://t.co/SvGtR6tdpV	http://twitter.com/tovfegh/status/560948268679430144	136
01/25/2015 14:43	Add your voice of condemnation against #AssadWarCrimes Genocide #RT Let be a “voice” not an “echo” http://t.co/GnTrxo6cTO	http://twitter.com/tovfegh/status/559360925249986560	127

Table 3. The top ten most retweeted AHRO's posts.

Further, one more oppositional media outlet is Ahwaz News Agency (ANA) (ahwaziarabs.info). ANA is based in the UK and was founded by the Ahwazi Friendship Society in 2005. It is run by the “Ahwazi Arab Solidarity Network, a coalition of NGOs defending the rights of Arabs persecuted by the Iranian regime” according to its Twitter account (twitter.com/ahwaznews) that has a few followers and only 3 retweets from Iran. On its Facebook page which has only 2052 likes (facebook.com/pages/Ahwaz-News), the following is mentioned: “Ethnic Ahwazi Arabs are today demanding collective rights, including the redistribution of oil revenues, an end to forced displacement, equal labour rights, environmental protection and cultural freedom”.

Another Iranian oppositional Ahwazi group is called The Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahwaz (ASMLA) (ahwazna.net). Its motto is “Awareness, loyalty, and sacrifice,” but it is not clear from its website where the organization is located. Its Twitter page (twitter.com/ahwazna1999) has 9,002 followers and according to Hexagon Crimson statistics, Saudi Arabia fans come in number one ($n=10696$) followed by Turkey ($n=1698$) and Kuwait ($n=403$), while Iran is number 36 with 15 retweets only (See Chart 6).

Chart 6. Retweets from ASMLA's Twitter page.

Table (4) shows the top ten most retweeted ASMLA's posts for the period of 2013-12-19 to 2015-05-01. Similar to Al-Ahwazi's posts that are cited above, ASMLA focuses on the political activism of Arab Ahwazis and often uses the term "Persian enemy" to describe the Iranian authorities. There is also a clear European connection as many tweets are focused on protests organized in Europe. Further, ASMLA seems interested in other non-Arab Iranian oppositional groups as it refers to the armed activities of the Balushi Adel Army.

Date	Sent Post	Post URL	Retweet Count
04/17/2015 10:52	Now in front of the European Parliament, hundreds of people gather to commemorate the anniversary of the Persian occupation of Ahwaz. The Ahwazi Struggle conference in the Hague#	http://twitter.com/ahwazna1999/status/589018703783718912	2048
04/12/2015 19:08	The poet of the Hazim Storm [The Saudi-led military intevison in Yemen], Ahmed Sabhan Al-Hazbawi, refuses a request by Iran while under torture	http://twitter.com/ahwazna1999/status/587331524694908928	1890
04/15/2015 10:14	[Originally in English] Ahwazi Uprising: between escalation and repression: Today is the tenth anniversary of the glorious Intifada 15... http://t.co/VPF3k8XWuv	http://twitter.com/ahwazna1999/status/588284251629486080	1832
04/14/2015 14:17	The spokesperson of Ahwaz, YaqoubHur Al-Tastari: We carry arms against Iran now and we need Egypt's support.	http://twitter.com/ahwazna1999/status/587982931525668865	1787

Date	Sent Post	Post URL	Retweet Count
04/08/2015 11:03	Al-Ahwaz program...The forgotten case on CBC Extra...	http://twitter.com/ahwazna1999/status/585759860622548992	1699
04/17/2015 11:22	The Ahwazi Struggle conference in the Hague and Arab communities denounce the Persian enemy and its systematic crimes	http://twitter.com/ahwazna1999/status/589026064501968896	1641
04/17/2015 12:23	Now from Luxembourg in from of the European Parliament. The Ahwazi Struggle conference in the Hague# The Hazim Storm#	http://twitter.com/ahwazna1999/status/589041506452971520	1501
04/10/2015 14:57	Al-Adel [Balushi] Army announces its responsibility for killing a number of Revolutionary Guards members	http://twitter.com/ahwazna1999/status/586543597790433281	1300
04/10/2015 13:27	From Riadh to Ahwaz, our Gulf is Arabian: The fans of the A-Hilal Saudi football team warmly welcomed the players...	http://twitter.com/ahwazna1999/status/586520791564451841	1290
04/10/2015 16:04	[Originally in English] Detained, humiliated, beaten and dragged to the ground for a 25-word Arabic poem: Iran has arrested Ahmad Sabh... http://t.co/H77277AIDq	http://twitter.com/ahwazna1999/status/586560332799221760	1083

Table 4. The top ten most retweeted ASMLA's posts.

Finally, the Facebook page of the “Ahwazi Revolution against the despicable Iranian Occupation”(ARDIO) has one of the highest number of followers with 152,955 likes (facebook.com/alahwazalarabia), yet again fans from Iran do not come in the top ten but only in the end (See Chart 7). A similar media outlet is called “The Occupied Ahwaz TV,” (ahwaz.tv) which is run by the US-based NLMA organization that is cited above. Its other media outlets include al-ahwaz.net and al-ahwaz.com. Its Twitter page (twitter.com/AhwaztvChannel) has only a few retweets from three countries: Belgium, UK, and Egypt and nothing from Iran.

Chart 7. Facebook fans of ARDIO's page.

In brief, the Ahwazi social media outlets mentioned above have clear anti-Iranian government rhetoric with clear demands for independence from the rest of the country in order to establish the state of Arabistan. In most of these media channels, there is pro-Sunni and anti-Shiite rhetoric that is antagonistic against the Persian control of Ahwaz and other Arab-dominated cities. What is striking is that online followers and fans of these social media outlets rarely come from Iran as they are mostly located in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Turkey.

Pro-Shiite SNS outlets

Aside from the pro-Sunni media outlets that are related to Arab Iranians, there are also a few Shiite ones that should be included in this study. The first and most popular one is called Al-Ahwaz TV (al-ahwaz.ir/ar) which

is an Iranian run channel that airs via Nilesat. The difference between the Saudi-run channel and this one is that the Saudi channel is written with a ‘ha’a’ letter (Ahwaz) which is voiceless glottal fricative, while the Iranian one is written with an ‘h’ letter which is also available in English. The Iranian channel, which is clearly Shiite, claims that it is devoted to the family of the prophet and those who follow them. It claims to be a non-governmental channel that is founded by Seyyed Muhammed Ali Al-Mowsawi, yet this channel cannot operate freely if its messages do not correspond with the ideology of the central Shiite government. In other words, the channel is supported, whether directly or not, by Iranian authorities as it seems to be used as a public diplomacy tool especially in that it airs Iranian programs and TV shows dubbed in Arabic. The channel’s Facebook page (facebook.com/AlahwazChannel) has 34,314 likes, and it also has a YouTube channel (youtube.com/user/AlahwazChannel). Its Twitter page has only 66 followers (twitter.com/AlahwazChannel). In relation to the channel’s Facebook fans, we find that the majority come from Iraq (0.81 percent) (See Chart 8).

Chart 8. Top 10 Facebook fans of ‘Al-Ahwaz TV’ (Iranian).

Another popular Ahwazi channel is called Ahwaz Voice (with an ‘h’ letter). It is a Germany-based online Shiite outlet that was founded in November 4, 2011, and it is called the “Voice of loyalty to Prophet Muhammed and his family.” It has a YouTube channel (youtube.com/ahwazvoice1), and a webpage on the Iranian popular site aparat.com/AhwazVoice, as well as a

Facebook page (facebook.com/ahwazchannel) with 15,773 fans. Based on Socialbakers statistics, we find that Iraq's fans come first (0.74 percent) followed by Saudi Arabia (0.05 percent), Lebanon (0.04 percent), and Iran (0.029 percent) (See Chart 9).

Chart 9. Top 10 Facebook fans of 'Ahwaz Voice' (Shiite).

In brief, the two Shiite and pro-government social media outlets have more followers from Iran than most of the anti-Shiite outlets examined above. This is an indication that the pro-Sunni outlets are not appealing enough for people living inside Iran for two possible reasons. First and most probably, it is related to the fact that the foreign-funded channels mostly target Sunni Arab Ahwazis who constitute a minority in Iran as the Shiite outlets seem to be far more popular. It is also possible that Arab Iranians feel insecure following and liking social media outlets that are regarded as anti-government for fear of being identified and persecuted which routinely happens in totalitarian states like Iran and the majority of other countries in the Middle East region.

Conclusion

Arab Ahwazis are playing part of the geopolitical regional struggle in the Middle East as the two major powers represented in Saudi Arabia and Iran are actively trying to influence them in order to achieve their respective interests. The results of this study indicate that the majority of Facebook fans

and Twitter followers in relation to pro-Sunni outlets are from Saudi Arabia, while Iran is rarely found in the top ten countries. On the other hand, pro-Shiite social media outlets that are linked to Arab Iranians have more followers from Iran. These results indicate that the Saudi Arabian active efforts are not effective inside Iran. In general, Saudi Arabia wants to weaken the Iranian control over the region, which is considered a threat to Saudi political, economic, and religious goals and interests. This goal is clearly evident in the latest Saudi military interventions in Bahrain and Yemen as stated above. On the other hand, Iran wants stability within its borders, yet it also tries to agitate the Shiite communities in Yemen, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia against the Sunni governments in order to achieve similar objectives. The two sides, however, are employing media channels and their accompanying social media outlets to influence public opinion, and Arab Ahwazis remain in-between the anvil and hammer in their struggle to maintain their ethnic and religious identity.

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A Page and Its Politics: Situating Kullinā Khālid Saʿīd in Egypt's Ideological Landscape at the Time of Revolution'

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Abstract:

In discussions concerning the importance of social media in the 25 January revolution, a central role is given to the “Kullinā Khālid Saʿīd” [We're all Khaled Said] Facebook page. Using an advanced data collection and extraction application called Netvizz, a research team consisting of Arabists and Media studies specialists has collected and analysed all of the posts and comments exchanged through the page. This data set allows for a systematic analysis of the page. This article offers an outline of the ideological nature of “Kullinā Khālid Saʿīd,” with particular emphasis on the “revolutionary” period between 1 January – 11 February 2011. It argues that the page shows no evidence of political bias in the sense of explicit favoring of a political group. Rather, the page constituted a community of users who abstained from using politically factional language. Reflecting the mood and concerns of the revolution's grassroots masses, it clearly illustrates the disinclination to engage with formal politics.

Keywords:

social media, cyberactivism, democracy, Internet, Arab Spring, Internet studies, Egypt, activism

Introduction

Disregarding the utopians and dystopians at the extremes of the debate concerning the Internet as a means of political change, it is safe to say that after the great uprisings of the Arab Spring, it is an established truth that the Internet can function as both a space for dissent and as a tool for activists to mobilize protests (Aouragh & Alexander 2011; Lim 2012). Especially social media such as Facebook have functioned in this manner. By far the most popular Facebook page in terms of received likes and user comments

was the much-discussed Egyptian page called “Kullinā Khālid Saʿīd” [We’re all Khaled Said], named after the Egyptian youth who was beaten to death by police officers in Alexandria in June 2010. This page was established and maintained, at first anonymously, by the young Google-marketeer Wael Ghonim in June 2010, as a site where people could come together to express their anger over this injustice. Soon the page would attract tens of thousands of people and coordinate so-called silent stands (*wagfāt sāmīta*) in public spaces of Cairo and Alexandria. Towards the end of 2010, with the outbreak of the Tunisian revolution, the page became more revolutionary in tone and by mid-January its calls for a massive demonstration on January 25 reached half a million Facebook users. Throughout the momentous eighteen days leading to the resignation of Mubarak on February 11 and in the following months, the page remained an important online space where news was shared and strategies were discussed.

This article intends to shed light on the question whether the Khālid Saʿīd page (looking at both posts and comments) reflected certain political tendencies or explicit favoring of a political group, other than voicing requests for justice for Khālid Saʿīd and the general demands of the revolution concerning civil liberties, state violence, and endemic corruption. Various theoreticians of the global wave of protests have claimed that these protests were characteristically outside formal politics. In his inquiry into today’s networked social movements, Castells characterizes these movements as leaderless, distrustful of politics and therefore without political (ideological) programme (Castells 2012: 224–227). While acknowledging this can be a weakness, Castells points also to an advantage: “[Without a specified programme for the achievement of aims, these movements] cannot be channeled into a political action that is narrowly instrumental. Therefore, they can hardly be co-opted by political parties (..)” (Op. cit. 227). Similarly, Bennett & Segerberg stress the ‘success’ of protest movements in remaining free of involvement by ‘conventional organizations’, such as when they write of the Spanish *Indignados* movement: “One of the most remarkable aspects of this sustained protest organization was its success at keeping political parties, unions, and other powerful political organizations out: indeed, they were targeted as part of the political problem.” (Bennet & Segerberg 2012: 741).

These scholarly claims were preceded by voices on the ground. It will be remembered that in Egypt, the revolutionary forces¹ at the time insisted

that they were not in fact interested in politics, meaning ideological party politics. During the demonstrations, chants and banners were coordinated to avoid partisan sloganeering. While it is significant that those speaking on behalf of the uprising tended to steer clear of declaring a particular politics, this is not proof of the absence of a dominant political persuasion among the masses in the uprising. The question is how we can investigate the political orientation (if there was one) of the Egyptian revolution at the time. One way to begin to answer this question is to study the discourse of the revolution through an analysis of the “Kullinā Khālid Saʿīd” Facebook page itself. Starting in the Autumn of 2013, a research team at the University of Amsterdam and the American University in Cairo, consisting of new media researchers and Arabists, have used Netvizz (Rieder 2013), a research application for Facebook analysis, to extract all available data from the page, covering the entire period of activity from June 2010 until July 2013.² This data set, containing 14,072 posts, 6.8 million comments, and 30 million likes made by 1.9 million users, offers a unique opportunity for a thorough study of the actual content of communication on the page that many consider to be the most important online space in the run-up to and during the Egyptian revolution (Eltantawy & Wiest 2011; Gerbaudo 2012; Lesch 2011; Lim 2012).

In order to provide the necessary context, this article will first briefly give an overview of the Egyptian political landscape. This overview informs us on what to look for in the data: what political tendencies might one expect to be expressed? The political overview is then followed by a short exposé on Wael Ghonim, initiator of the page and its key administrator. Even though the data of the page consists only for a fraction of texts that were written by the administrators (14,072 administrator posts against 6.8 million comments), an administrator presumably has great influence over the character of a page. Only the admins could submit posts to the pages, whereas users were restricted to commenting and liking in response to these posts. Subsequently, we will provide an analysis of certain statistics that should shed light on the question at hand, employing the dataset as a reflection of the discourse of the revolution. The analysis will be focused on the period 1 January to 11 February 2011, which includes the run-up to the outbreak of massive demonstrations and the fateful eighteen days of protests that culminated in the resignation of Mubarak.

Contextualizing the page

Given the enduring authoritarian nature of the Egyptian state, it has long been difficult to see the political landscape clearly. Going back to the period immediately preceding the outbreak of the revolution, the situation could be described as dire. Opposition parties were coopted or banned, the press was seriously restricted. Labour organization was severely curtailed. The Muslim Brotherhood was commonly referred to as the main opposition movement. Despite it being officially banned, the Brotherhood succeeded in offering socio-economic help to those Egyptians who suffered from the state's economic liberalization. It also engaged in the feeble electoral process by fielding candidates with other political parties in which - depending on how much leeway they were given - they could be quite successful. In this way, the Islamist organization gradually became part of official politics. A more activist approach was only adopted by some much smaller organizations such as Kifaya and the April 6 Youth Movement, who advocated for political liberalization and worker's rights.³

For some time, it was reasonable to divide Egyptian politics in an Islamist, a Liberal, a Leftist and a Nationalist current (Woltering 2011; Abu-Rabi' 2004; Amīn al-Ālim 1996. The Egyptian revolution however, changed the political climate and the ways in which we can discern a political map. For a short period, political freedoms increased and new voices could emerge. The emergence of a Salafi political language is a major case in point. Long held to be politically aloof by their very dogma, Egyptian Salafi leaders quickly adopted a pragmatic approach to the post-Mubarak political vacuum, and reasoned that in this particular situation it is beneficial to engage with the political process. Less surprisingly, the Muslim Brotherhood rose to become the largest political power in terms of electoral victories. On the other hand, during the early post-Mubarak period between the outbreak of the revolution until at least the parliamentary elections held in November 2011, the revolution continued to be embodied by countless revolutionary groups (including the April 6 Youth Movement as the key organization) that were referred to as 'the revolutionary forces' who claimed to be a-political and notably refused to coalesce into a political party. Since the coup d'état of July 3, 2013, led by army general 'Abd al-Fattāḥ al-Sīsī, political and press freedoms have deteriorated immensely, effectively closing the window of new possibilities that was opened by the 25 January revolution. Looking

at this time span of two and a half years, it is clear that in addition to the old political currents comprising the broad labels of Islamists, Liberals, Leftists and Nationalists, it is impossible to discuss contemporary Egyptian politics without referring to Salafism and the Muslim Brotherhood as two distinct Islamist political currents, in addition to taking into account the more amorphous and currently quashed 'revolutionary forces'. From this assessment followed the search terms that we applied to the Facebook data.

Wael Ghonim

The Facebook page "Kullinā Khālid Sa'īd" was created in June 2010 by Wael Ghonim, an Egyptian computer engineer working in Dubai as the head of marketing for Google Middle East and North Africa. He attracted Abd al-Rahmān Manṣūr and others to help in the administration of the page (Ghonim 2012: 242), but his role as primary "admin" is not in doubt. Ghonim remained anonymous until his public appearance in a television interview on February 7, 2011, a few days before President Mubarak's resignation. Until 2010, Ghonim had not been politically active. In January 2010, he became involved in the campaign for political change led by Muhammad Baradei. Notably, his involvement in this campaign mainly consisted of offering his services as an online marketing specialist. Six months later, when learning of the murder of Khālid Sa'īd, Ghonim was shocked by the brutality of Sa'id's death, and decided to take this up as a cause to be fought for through online activism.

In his memoir of the revolution, Ghonim offers a view into his background and ideals (Ghonim 2012). Ambitious, eager and pious, Ghonim developed in his youth a can-do mentality that set him apart from his peers. He lived for some years in the United States, where he 'was in awe of the quality of education, the respect for citizens' rights and the democratic process (..)'. (Ghonim 2012: 17). While in the US, he also engaged in online Islamic awareness by starting up the website IslamWay.com. He might have made a future in the US but decided not to. He also did not opt for American citizenship when this became a possibility after his marriage to an American woman: 'I'm a proud Egyptian and I find no reason why I should apply for any other citizenship.' (Ghonim 2012: 5).

From the autobiographical sections of Ghonim's book, he emerges mostly as an Egyptian patriot, politically liberal but with culturally or religiously conservative values. He does not come across as a political activist, staying

out of demonstrations and public political discussions. And although he joins the Baradei campaign, he does not identify with a specific political programme or ideology. Furthermore, it is of interest to take note of how Ghonim intended to keep “Kullinā Khālīd Saʿīd” a non-political platform, emphatically avoiding that the page would be seen as an extension of one or another political campaign, party, or ideology. One might even say that Ghonim emerges as a reluctant revolutionary, if revolutionary is a description that applies at all. His political leadership consisted in organizing a form of communicational and organizational process rather than in proposing or promoting a particular political ideology. Or, more precisely, the stated ideology was, indeed, a combination of broad demands for civil liberties and an emphasis on democratic deliberation. About the language he employed in his posts, he states: ‘the tone on the page was always decent and nonconfrontational’ (Ghonim 2012: 66). Ghonim describes at length the difference between his page and a second page dedicated to demand justice for Khaled Said. This page, *Isīmī Khālīd Muḥammad Saʿīd* (My name is Khālīd Muḥammad Saʿīd)⁴ was a vehicle for political activism, which was reflected in its confrontational language, which Ghonim felt was ‘unhelpful in making this cause a mainstream one’ (Ghonim 2012: 59). Rather than seeking to promote a culture of political activism against the status quo, Ghonim wanted to create awareness: ‘Engagement was the page’s core concept and was certainly far more important to the page than activism.’ (Ghonim 2012: 108). This broader appeal ensured that Ghonim’s page gradually (but well before the outbreak of the uprising) overtook the older page in terms of likes (this may also have been the result of the fact that the other page was made inaccessible for a while for having reportedly broken Facebook regulations) (Ghonim 2012: 113).

In sum, the key figure behind the Facebook page was more a concerned citizen with broadly “liberal democratic” ideals and considerable skill in online media and marketing than a revolutionary ideologue. While one might describe him as an activist for the liberal Baradei-campaign, it must be stressed that he made an effort to prevent that the Facebook page would become intertwined with the Baradei-campaign. For instance, he would not ‘share’ Baradei events or posts on the Khālīd Saʿīd page. The remainder of this article will show the extent to which the content of the page – consisting overwhelmingly of users’ comments rather than administrator’s posts – reflects this non-partisan ideal.

Analysing the data

For this research project, we have collected all data exchanged through the entire lifetime of the “Kullinā Khālid Sa‘īd” page, from June 2010 until July 2013, when the last post was added to the page timeline. The data was extracted via the Netvizz application (Rieder 2013). The full data set contains 14,072 posts by the page admins, and 6.8 million comments and 30 million likes by 1.9 million users. Building on this data, we interrogated the page’s political orientation from three different angles.

The first approach looks at the hyperlinks that were shared in the users’ comments. As various researchers have shown, hyperlink analysis can provide a window on the organizational and ideological ecology in which on-line communication takes place (Foot & Schneider 2006; Poell 2014; Bennett&Segerberg 2011). By sharing links to particular sites and pages, users not only show which organizations they are connected with, but also with what content they feel affinity or want to enter into a dialogue with. Hence, through hyperlink analysis, we get a first indication of how the Facebook page was situated in the Egyptian online political landscape. Second, employing a custom-built search tool, we have collected all of the comments, shared in the period from January 1 until February 11, containing references to particular political parties and organizations. In this manner, it was possible to gain insight in the relative importance and direction of the page’s ‘party-political’ discourse at the height of the revolutionary period. The analysis starts at January 1, 2011, when an enormous increase in activity occurred after a Coptic church in Alexandria was bombed, killing 23 people. It ends after Mubarak stepped down. Finally, for the same period, we have collected, using the same method, terms allowing us to detect the presence of certain abstract political ideologies in the comments posted on the page.

The Online Ecology

The analysis of the list of most-linked to Internet domains immediately shows that most shared links on the Facebook page referenced other pages within the Facebook domain or posts on the same page, see Table 1. This single fact reveals little concerning our research question, but underscores the centrality of the Facebook platform. The same holds for the second most-linked to domain, Youtube. Both Facebook and Youtube are channels for information that may carry any or no political message. The domains

themselves are not revealing of political persuasion. Looking at the top 35 linked-to domains (i.e. the domains that have been linked to at least 60 times), and ignoring the domains that may be dismissed as ‘channels’, we must conclude that this list does not show any clear orientation. The list offers a very diverse set of domains. Remarkably, there is not a single directly political website (there is for instance no link to a political party or a political campaign website). The most referenced domains beyond the major social platforms are mostly news sites, many of which are non-partisan. Among sites that do have an ideological persuasion, we find no clear bias towards any one particular trend either. This approach therefore suggests that the Facebook page functioned as a non-ideological environment, much in keeping with the admin’s ambition to create a platform open to all and without (party-)political connotations. This is confirmed by an analysis of the 100 most referenced URLs. The URLs in this list that have a clear political orientation are almost without exception Facebook pages that were established some time after the initial phase of the revolution. The second highest ranking (677 references) for instance is a URL linking to a Facebook page supporting ‘the return of Ahmad Shafiq’, suggesting the page was established after Shafiq had left Egypt for Abu Dhabi hours after his defeat in the presidential elections of June 2012. Ranking at number twelve and thirteen are two Facebook pages, one in Arabic and one in English, declaring their opposition against presidential candidate Amr Moussa. Many other links are no longer accessible, but judging from what can be read in the URL, a great number of links are to pages that have a revolutionary character or that celebrate Egyptian patriotism (see Table 2). URLs of a political as opposed to a revolutionary character are few and almost without exception date from the period that followed 11 February.

1	facebook.com 32766	Channel
	youtube.com 6210	Channel
	youth7.com 597	Independent newspaper
	dvd4arab.maktoob.com 433	Channel
5	masrawy.com 423	Independent news site

	dostor.org 358	Independent newspaper, leftist
	alomah.4ulike.com 336	Independent newspaper, islamist-leaning
	shorouknews.com 209	Independent newspaper, liberal
	almasryalyoum.com 201	Independent newspaper, liberal
10	bit.ly 200	Channel
	mediafire.com 183	Channel
	democraticac.com 153	Channel
	ahram.org.eg 140	State newspaper
	tagesschau.de 139	German news site
15	almesryoon.com 119	Independent newspaper
	download.quranicaudio.com 114	Channel for audio of Quranic citations
	almasry-alyoum.com 113	Independent newspaper, liberal
	4shared.com 111	Channel
	on.fb.me 109	Channel
20	goo.gl 108	Channel
	apps.facebook.com 102	Channel
	100fm6.com 92	Dead link
	taghyeer.net 92	Dead link
	facebookviewprofile.weebly.com 84	Channel
25	6april.org 75	Revolutionary movement
	youtu.be 74	Channel

	alwafd.org 72	Opposition newspaper, left-liberal Wafd party
	akhbarak.net 72	News site
	aljazeera.net 70	Pan-Arab news channel
30	m.facebook.com 69	Channel
	aljazeerataalk.net 67	Pan-Arab news channel
	forums.fatakat.com 66	Forum
	spreadsheets.google.com 66	Channel
	ar.wikipedia.org 61	Wikipedia
35	opera.com 61	Channel

Table 1. Domain count.

URL	#	Description
http://www.facebook.com/3shan.Masr	1325	revolutionary Facebook page
http://www.facebook.com/pages/ 169547939762153/مليونيه-العودة-احمد-شفيق	677	post-revolution partisan (Ahmad Shafiq)
http://www.facebook.com/pages/asbw-altthyr/ 195112030517484	525	post-revolution anti- corruption
http://www.facebook.com/ElShaheed	415	<i>Kullinā Khālīd Saʿīd</i> Facebook page
http://dvd4arab.maktoob.com/showthread. php?t=2788738	395	Yahoo blog for sharing movies
http://www.facebook.com/pages/ fkhw-r-banny-msry-Proud-to-be- Egyptian/150471521678294	376	Egyptian patriottic

URL	#	Description
http://alomah.4ulike.com/t17635-topic	336	article in obscure tabloid slandering Khaled Said
http://www.facebook.com/pages/nkt-msryt/117261791675285	335	unavailable
http://www.facebook.com/ATOZeg	209	Egyptian youth page with commercial connotations
http://www.facebook.com/pages/la-lmrw-mwsy-No-for-Amr-Mousa/137133456352028	201	unavailable, but URL indicates page is against Amr Mousa (presumably from the period of post-revolution era presidential elections)
http://www.facebook.com/NoFor.Amr.Mousa	194	unavailable, but URL indicates page is against Amr Mousa (presumably from the period of post-revolution era presidential elections)
http://www.facebook.com/RNN.NEWS	192	inaccessible
http://www.facebook.com/pages/Geo-lenses-dsat-jyw-alkwryt/142281635836699	179	commercial
http://www.facebook.com/pages/shbab-msr-alahrar/193735153979756?sk=wall	171	revolutionary youth page, currently anti-MB
http://www.facebook.com/democraticac	156	democratic studies (academic)
http://www.democraticac.com/	153	democratic studies (academic)
http://www.facebook.com/home.php?sk=group_168789863168690&cap=1	149	unavailable

URL	#	Description
http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=10150141634365046	146	unavailable
http://www.facebook.com/pages/%D9%85%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AF%D9%89-%D8%B4%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%AB%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A9-25-%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%B1/151028674953627?sk=wall	144	inaccessible
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-pJU_xZVZ4	143	removed
http://www.tagesschau.de/inland/wulffrede112.html	134	unavailable, speech by German president Wulff
http://www.facebook.com/pages/Youth-after-the-revolution-shbab-ma-bd-althwrt/129141437156388?sk=wall	124	democratic revolutionary youth group from Damanhur
http://www.facebook.com/pages/nsb-tdhkary-ltkrym-shhda-25-ynayr/189769594377593	121	group to commemorate the martyrs
http://www.facebook.com/event.php?eid=188502704517326	120	post-revolution call for improving university education
http://www.facebook.com/pages/msh-hmshy-mn-althryr/149940441730521	108	est. 7 February, revolutionary page “I won’t leave Tahrir”
http://www.facebook.com/event.php?eid=185782164794026	107	event 4 March calling for trial of Mubarak
http://www.facebook.com/pages/%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7-%D9%84%D8%AF%D8%B9%D9%85-%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%88%D9%85%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%83%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%B9%D8%B5%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%81/205235419488005	104	postrevolutionary page in support of interim PM Esam Sharaf

URL	#	Description
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KHQI99yEZ3A	100	unavailable
http://www.facebook.com/mshawky1#!/photo.php?pid=259086&id=106795829350329 مسم	100	unavailable

Table 2. Most referenced URLs (URLs that were referenced at least 100 times).

Political organizations

Key political organizations in Egypt were (and are) not many. Official opposition parties have generally lost their relevance a long time ago, since their credibility sank every time they agreed to participate in rigged elections or otherwise allowed cooptation by the regime. The ruling National Democratic Party was not so much a political party as much as it was a front for a system infused with corruption and concerned with maintaining the status quo. It is not promising to research the ways in which the NDP is discussed on the page, since we already know that the NDP was regarded as the central enemy of the page's community and seen as the symbol of Egypt's many problems (Ghonim 2012). As to opposition parties or movements, we know that the page publicly associated with the April 6 Movement (incidentally, April 6 would always deny that it was a political organization). Also Kifaya (i.e. the Egyptian Movement for Change) was an organization which one would expect to feature positively in the comments. More of a question mark is the way in which Egypt's largest opposition movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, featured on the page.

For this second approach a search string was employed with the words Kifaya [kifāya], April [abrīl] and Brothers/Brotherhood [al-ikhwān].⁵ The search was restricted to the period 1 January-1 February 2011. The search string is not ideal, since the word kifāya can also simply mean 'enough' rather than being a reference to the movement which is so called. The search yields around 10,000 comments in total, which is only a small percentage of the total number of comments produced in this period. Of the three search terms, kifāya features in ca. 1% of all comments, the term al-ikhwān is found in around 0.5% of all comments, and abrīl is the least mentioned, in a

negligible percentage of comments. As Line graph 1 shows, the distribution is fairly even, except for a collective dip on January 29, which was caused by the Internet blackout Mubarak's regime orchestrated.

Qualitative analysis of this data would be too time consuming if it involves reading these thousands of comments. It would also be unnecessary: rather than reading everything that anyone has written on the page in January 2010 using one of the search terms, we let the Facebook page's community of users make a selection for us, by only looking at the comments that have received a minimum of 'likes'. This ensures that we are looking at those comments that users themselves have deemed important. For this article we have analyzed only those comments that were given at least 5 likes, which reduced the number of comments to a few hundred. The ensuing data thus reduced showed firstly that in the majority of cases where the word *kifāya* was used, its use was not connected to the movement but rather intended to convey the literal meaning. References to *kifāya* are thus comparable to references to 'April', which means to say references to it are very limited. On the other hand, the comments containing the term *al-ikhwān* nearly all speak indeed of the Muslim Brotherhood. Remarkably, the content of these comments varies rather evenly from negative to positive appraisals of the MB; there is no clear tendency in this regard. Many of the comments do not take a position with regard to the MB, but only mention them as part of the socio-political spectrum. Again, the data indicates that - at least in the period under study here - "Kullinā Khālīd Sa'īd" was not a politicized page in the sense that it tended to one or another political persuasion.

Line graph 1.

Social and political concepts

It is possible that the users of the page were disinclined to discuss specific political organizations, but were more open to discussing broader political labels such as Islamism, nationalism, Salafism etc. Applying the search string [liberālī, qawmī, islāmī, salafi, yasārī]⁶ for the period 1 January 2011 until 1 February 2011, yields all comments that contained one or more of the words liberal/liberalism, (Arab) nationalist/nationalism, Islamist/Islamism, Salafi/Salafism and leftist/left wing. The datashows that these terms are used in 0.0 to 1.5 % percent of all comments (see Line graph 2). The use of the terms 'liberal' and 'leftist' is negligible, the use of the term (Arab) nationalist hovers around 0.2% (but note that qawmī can also mean 'national' or 'domestic' as in e.g. gross domestic product), the term Salafi peaks twice above 1% but remains otherwise a very modestly employed term. The term Islamic/Islamist is more stable at around 0.5%. This may however have much to do with the fact that this term is ambiguous in that it can refer both to the political ideology of political Islam as well as to the simple adjective 'Islamic', as in 'Islamic values', 'Islamic countries' etc. An additional search with the same string for the ensuing period of February 1-11 shows that the term 'nationalist' and after that 'Islamic/Islamist' are most often used, at around 0.1-0.3% of comments (that means for this period that between 50 and 100 comments per day contain the term, shooting up to beyond 150 on the momentous last day of February 11). The use of the other terms is negligible. These data underscore once again that the page was not intensively used for politics other than the immediate concerns of the uprising.

Line graph 2.

Conclusion

At the outset of this research, the expectation was that the data would show that despite the oft-declared assurances that the Facebook page - as the revolution as a whole - was a supra-political affair, one could point out clear political biases or at least continuous referencing of explicit political groups and ideologies. All approaches employed here, however, point in the same direction, namely that - at least for the period studied here - Ghonim's intention to create a page that served as a supra-political non-ideological platform with a broad, civil-rights oriented outlook, was successful. The period studied here is the most active period of the page's life span, on some days receiving over hundred thousand comments. It was the period in which it would have been very time-consuming and at times impossible for the administrator(s) to weed out unwanted comments and block unwanted users. Apparently, the page did not need strict policing by an administrator, but actually constituted a community of users who generally abstained from using politically factional language. It may be seen as a testament to the Egyptian revolution's unity of purpose, but it may as well be seen as an illustration of the revolution's Achilles' heel. In so far as the Facebook page of "Kullinā Khālīd Sa'īd" is a reflection of the mood and concerns of the revolution's grassroots masses, it clearly shows the disinclination to engage with formal politics on the part of the revolutionary forces. While general requests for civil rights and democratic governance served to galvanize an ideologically scattered public in relation to a common cause, the task of assembling an actual government and concrete policies could no longer circumvent established actors and their ideologically more explicit ideas.

The data set that enabled the research presented here offers a window on three years of contentious politics in Egypt. Taken together, the 14,000 posts and nearly seven million comments form a huge document of 'history from below' that is uniquely researchable by using digital methods. Systematic queries for particular keywords allow for tracing how particular issues came to the fore and again disappeared from public attention. The research team responsible for the present article has also used the data set to study the page's leadership dynamics and the way in which the page admins displayed what is best termed 'connective leadership'. (Poell et al. 2015) A more detailed approach is taken in our group's investigation of the way in which the page's polls were used as a form of direct democracy.⁷ For Arabists

the data also forms a treasure trove that allows for research in the field of sociolinguistics: what type of content is conveyed in what variety of the Arabic language?8 Since social media services enjoy continuing popularity in the Arab world and beyond, applications like Netvizz provide the opportunity to study these and other aspects both from quantitative and qualitative perspectives. While the mass of data can be a blessing, it also confronts researchers with problems concerning logistics, reliability, and analytical technique that we have addressed in detail in a separate publication (Rieder et al. forthcoming). It is up to social science and humanities researchers to continuously assess how the technical possibilities can be made meaningful in relation to actual research questions. This paper indicates a possible direction for analysis, but only further research will be able to confirm long term usefulness and viability.

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Notes

¹ E.g. April 6 Youth Movement, National Association for Change, Coalition of the Youth of the Revolution etc.

² Although the data concerned is public information, for reasons of privacy the data was anonymized before being submitted to analysis.

³ See El-Ghobashy (2011) for how these trends merged in the course of the Egyptian revolution.

⁴ See: <https://www.facebook.com/esmy.khaled.sa3eed>

⁵ Three spelling variations were taken into account for *al-ikhwān*, because of the often careless spelling on social media: الإخوان | الأخوان | الاخوان

⁶ The search allowed for spelling variations such as the use of *alif maqṣūra*: لبرالي ال
البرالي البرالي، قومى اسلامى، اسلامى اسلامى، بسلفى اسلفى، بيسارى ايسارى

⁷ See the forthcoming article by Rasha Abdulla et al. “Facebook Polls as Proto-Democratic Instruments in the Egyptian Revolution: The ‘We Are All Khaled Said’ Facebook Page”.

⁸ See the forthcoming article by E.W.A. Zack et al. “Language choice and identity on Facebook: the case of ‘We are all Khaled Said’”.

2011 Tahrir Square Demonstrations in Egypt: Semantic Structures That Unify And Divide

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Abstract:

While literature has focused on political, economic and social indicators to understand the shifts, or rather the fragmentation of the political scene in Egypt, the role of semiotic constructions was significantly if not totally neglected. This article investigates whether the demands and messages produced by protesters of Tahrir Square in January 2011 have played a role in processes of unification and fragmentation of Egyptians. Following Roland Barthes' (2006) and Chris Barker's (2011) methods of linkage to define the meanings suggested by the commentaries that appeared on the banners during the demonstrations of 2011 in Egypt, this article argues that the demands, messages and meanings produced and suggested throughout the demonstrations of 2011 in Egypt have not been responded to accordingly; therefore they have created a complicated transformational process that is replete with polarization. The messages, which brought people to collectively act against authoritarianism, are the same messages that have outflanked them. An Egyptian profound debate to define the signified meanings at Tahrir Square has not occurred in Egypt leaving a tremendous space for interpretations and conflicting perceptions.

Keywords:

Arab Spring, activism, democracy, Internet studies, Egypt

Introduction

The so-called "Arab Spring" began on December 17, 2010 in Tunisia when Mohammad Bouazizi, a vegetable salesman in informal economy, set himself on fire on January 4, 2011. He was denied the opportunity to continue his low-paid job and his action was to protest against mistreatment by the local police and government authorities. Protests, which were attended by informal workers, lawyers and most importantly the youth, spread quickly

from rural areas to urban locations in Tunisia. This civil protest led to the removal of Zine Al-Abdin Bin Ali after two decades of dictatorship.

These protests then spread to Egypt where they were instrumental in toppling Hosni Mubarak, who had been in power for almost three decades. Following the January demonstrations in Egypt, protests spread to Yemen, Algeria, Libya, Syria, Jordan, Bahrain and even Saudi Arabia. There were also some protests in Morocco, Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine, but these were not sustained long enough to resonate in the media.

The uprising in Egypt was predominantly a campaign of nonviolent civil resistance which featured a series of demonstrations, marches, acts of civil disobedience, and labor strikes. The key motivations for these mass demonstrations in Egypt were political (repression and restrictions on civil liberties and political rights) and economic (inequality, poverty, unemployment, inflation, and corruption). Neither purely political concerns such as the desire of Arab populations for democracy, nor simple economic trends can wholly explain the protesters' desire to overthrow the autocratic rulers. The interaction of both factors caused the uprisings. Furthermore, the collective incapacity, that was unable to make significant change, turned into a collective action manifested by hundreds of thousands of demonstrators demanding their rights to end the authoritarian rule. While people had no other channels to express themselves, they mounted banners and drawings and chanted songs and slogans to convey clear messages to the internal and external frontiers of their society. Consequently, a constructional process of semantic structures has emerged to express peoples' demands.

While the demands of people at Tahrir Square were pretty straightforward, they have been partially or completely neutralized paving the way for a polarization process of the very semantic messages they demanded. But the question here is why could these messages unify Egyptians at the times of demonstrations and then fragment them throughout the process? In this article, I argue that the semantic structures produced during the demonstrations at Tahrir Square in 2011 served as a catalyst of unity among Egyptians because they merely achieved change but as a catalyst of division because they collided with the Egyptian traditional discourses about the same messages. Although the messages were straightforward, they were more complicated than it was anticipated due to a lack of a profound debate to define their underlying concepts. People had different and rather conflicting perceptions of these underlying concepts.

This article advances as follows: In the sections after the theoretical review, an analysis of three images chosen from Tahrir Square and published by an Egyptian newspaper will be examined in relation to their cultural and historical connotations. Similar images to support the findings of the paper will be included in Appendix 1.

These photographs were chosen for several specific reasons:

1. They were iconic images produced and reproduced by the Egyptian media and the international media.
2. They all contain significant slogans or phrases that explain and explore the specific cultural contexts in which they were constructed.
3. They are illustrative of the basic demands of Egyptians at that time.
4. They are spontaneous rather than 'staged' photographs.

The text that appears in these three images (and in Appendix 1) covers a broad range of issues that seemed to be important for the Egyptian people.

The analysis of the three photographs of banners that appeared in the protests at Tahrir Square provides a window into the semantic structures and signifying practices produced throughout the protests and sheds light on their social, cultural and historical roots. These images enable us to compare the meanings produced during the uprising in January 2011 to the social, political and economic realities in Egypt after the revolution, namely under the Muslim Brotherhood and later Al-Sisi. The analysis does not explain every aspect of the semantic structures produced throughout the January uprising or the uprising in general, but rather offers a glimpse of some semiotic constructions to understand why messages could equally unify people and fragment them.

Theoretical framework

One of the founders of the field of semiotics, Charles Pierce, argues that "nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign" (1931-58:172). Signs, which can take the form of words, images, sounds etc., have no intrinsic meaning and become signs only when we attribute meaning to them. The-

refore, specific cultural contexts can shape the inherent concepts behind words quite dramatically. For instance, the semantic structures of the phrases emblazoned on the banners during the demonstrations in Egypt could carry different meanings to those same words produced during the Syrian Revolution. The realities and the context, in which these signs were produced, contribute to the definition of the concept being signified by them. Saussure (1916) points out that every sign has to have a signifier and a signified and the relationship between these two components is termed as signification. Therefore, any alteration of context may change the signification relationship between the signified and the signifying.

While language is not a neutral medium for the formation of meanings and knowledge, it constitutes the very meanings and knowledge about the world. As Barker (2011:7) puts it: "These processes of meaning production are signifying practices. In order to understand culture, we need to explore how meaning is produced symbolically in language as a 'signifying system'." This constitutes an important part of this article's attempt to explore and examine the signifying practices of a few slogans being symbolically produced during the demonstrations of 2011 in Egypt. Such an attempt will enable us to understand the cultural references, and to highlight the most important issues demanded, which are non-verbally suggested and signified.

In the majority of communication systems, "the signifying relation is not given analytically: the system proposes only a chain of signifiers, without naming in another way their signifieds: a discourse offers words, not the meaning of each of these words" (Barthes 2006:39). When Barthes wrote about fashion literature, he recognized that signifiers are most commonly given in a physical form, whereas the signifieds appearing in commentaries alongside the imagery. In this case, the "signification", the relationship between the signifiers and the signified units are given simultaneously (Barthes 2006).

If we apply Barthes' analysis to the wording that appeared on the banners during the demonstrations in Tahrir Square in 2011 and afterwards, it implies that the analysis could be applied in two forms. In the first form, the whole image could be considered as a signifier with the written words in the banners being the signified. In this sense, the signifier and the signified are given to us simultaneously in what Barthes refers to as "a text and its glossary of words," (Barthes 2006:43) which helps us "uncover the signifying

units of a continuous message” (2006:44). I argue that this form can only be applied to arranged photographs, and therefore, this form of analysis will not be considered in this article.

The second form, and the one that will be used throughout this analysis is one that considers the phrasing of the banner as the signifier and the background and scenery depicted in the image as the context. This helps us to understand the semiotic structure in which the words or commentaries on banners represent the form of expression (the signifiers), whereas the concept and semantic meaning that lies behind the actual words represents the form of content (the signifieds).

While this analysis does not or is unable to explain and identify all the suggested meanings of all the dimensions of the transformations in Egypt, this article will focus on the second form of analysis taking into consideration the relevance of analyzing the whole image based on the content analysis method proposed by Leeuwen and Jewitt (2001). Leeuwen and Jewitt (2001:15) state: “On each variable, values can be distinguished to yield the categories of content, which are to be observed.” The variables and their intrinsic values are critical to the understanding of the messages and meanings being produced by the demonstrators of Tahrir Square. Categories such as: size, gender, color, setting and role will be considered in the analysis of every image. These criteria will help better identify the signifiers and the signifieds in an organized and systematic manner.

Images regarded in this article focus on the semantic structures of the suggestions, phrases, slogans, and illustrative components imposed by the set of selected banners, which emerged during the period of protests. In this matter we will find the link between the form and the concept, or, in other words, between the signifier and the signified. The purpose of this analysis is to return to the most basic components of the revolutionary demonstrations by scrutinizing the slogans being chanted in the streets of Cairo, which, I argue, reflected to a great deal the real, honest and basic drivers of change in Egypt to act collectively and later divisively.

Image analysis from Tahrir Square

It seems romantic to watch people at Tahrir Square chanting their demands for the first time, but when investigating the semantic structures of their de-

mands we conclude that the same demands which brought people together to construct frames of collective action against dictatorships are the same ones which polarized them throughout the transformation process.

In the following selected images of the protests in Egypt, we are going to examine and explore the signifying practices of protesters (the processes of meaning production) by looking at the words in these images. In turn, the values contained within the images give a deeper insight into how the production of meaning is being conceived.

First image: Bread, Freedom, and Human Dignity

One of the first slogans appeared at Tahrir Square was, as in Image 1, about “bread, freedom and human dignity”. While this slogan was considered the revolution slogan, it only appeared on different occasions for the first several days of the uprising (See also Images 4, 5, 6, 7, 8). Later, this slogan took different variations. The most important one was “Bread, freedom and social justice”. As implied by the slogan: “Bread, freedom, and human dignity” which protesters chanted at Tahrir Square and other places in the region, inequality of opportunity was a central concern.

Image 1. Egyptians gathered at Tala'at Harb Street close to Tahrir Square. The banner behind them says: “bread - freedom - human dignity” [lit. khobz - huriyya - karama insaniyya]. © Image: Mohammad Maroof / Egypt Independent (Almasri Alyawm).

This image was captured in one of the streets next to Tahrir Square in Cairo. It is not a staged photograph and the raised hands and fists suggest the participants are chanting in support for the demonstration.

The age of the people standing directly next to the banner is varied, and their clothing suggests they are from the middle or poorer classes of society. Some have beards, which suggests they may be more religious, while others are wearing more modern clothing. Several of the participants are recording the protest with their mobile phones. All of the participants in this photograph are men.

This dominance of males in the demonstrations reflects the role the men play in Egyptian society. Nevertheless, women participated in demonstrations at Tahrir Square as well but the religious and traditional structures of the fabric of the Egyptian society urges women to rather gather in groups separate from men.

For decades, Egyptians had felt unable to go out on the streets and demand their rights. Therefore, such an incident was important, and accordingly, they tended to record as much as they could of it. The context in which this banner appears is a dangerous one; police forces and regime thugs could easily crack down on the demonstration. Mobile phones also served the purpose of documentation in case these incidents arose.

The banner, written in striking calligraphy on a simple white sheet held above the crowd, is the focus of the photograph. The words “bread,” “freedom,” and “human dignity” appear in green, blue, and black lettering, and it is most likely that the colors have been chosen for aesthetic reasons rather than to convey additional meaning through color symbolism. The same slogan in different colors appeared on other banners throughout the demonstrations (See Images 4, 5, 6, 7, 8). If the different colors of the words had been significant, they should have been consistently observed elsewhere at Tahrir Square.

The construction of the slogan and the order in which the words appear is important. Four words are easier to commit to memory and to chant, and the words create a punctuated rhythm when chanted. In the transliteration of the Arabic words presented below you can see how the ending syllable of the second word rhymes with the fourth:

Khobz, Hurriyya

Karama Insaniyya

It would have been difficult to chant if the order of the words had been “freedom - bread - human dignity“:

Hurriya, Khobz

Karama Insaniyya

The choice of words cannot only be for the sake of rhyming. The meaning of the words and their relation to the social construct of the Egyptian society is substantial because the semantic structures of these signifying units relate to cultural and historical connotations.

Bread

The very first and most basic demand, as signified by the wording on the banner is “*bread*”. It has superseded freedom and human dignity. This sends a clear message that the basic needs of people are economic rather than political or social. Bread is central to Egyptian life and the Egyptian diet - reflected in the fact that colloquial Arabic in Egypt uses the word *aish* [lit. ,life‘] for bread, rather than the standard Arabic *khobz*, which is used in this banner. While the choice between synonyms (*khobz* vs. *aish*) is never neutral, choosing of the word *khobz* remains unclear because the word *aish* was used in other slogans later on (See Images 7 and 8).

Bread also has historical roots in Egyptian society. A 2013 Business Report article suggests: “Bread has been one of Egypt’s most sensitive issues. President Anwar Sadat triggered riots when he cut the bread subsidy in 1977” (Reuters 2013). In 2008, some 500 political activists and textile workers were arrested and dozens of others injured during clashes with police in the Nile Delta city on April 6 in protests over high bread prices (IRIN 2008). According to the Telegraph (2008), Egypt is the world’s biggest consumer of bread, with each Egyptian eating 400 grams of bread a day. That compares with France - the land of the baguette - where the figure is only 130 grams per day. The symbolic meaning of the word bread in Egyptian society has great importance and represents the daily life of Egyptians. Bread can also be essential for human dignity, so people do not fall into poverty or have to beg for food.

Needless to say, this demand is fundamental for the Egyptian people but it does not define the whole revolution (See Images 9, 10 and 11). However, the discourse about this specific issue witnessed shifts in priorities and can be divided into three categories: The first one is to prioritize the economic conditions people are living. Egyptian media at that time turned from praising Mubarak's rule to looking for the distressed to assert peoples' demands of better economic conditions (Amara 2011; Faruk 2011). The second one stressed that the revolution was not a "revolution of the hungry (or the poor)" [lit. *thawratjiya'a*], but a revolution for freedom and social justice in which the rich as well as the poor participated (Sahsah 2011; Ali 2011; Egypt 2011; Abu Mahfouz 2011). The third one kept on warning from a future revolution of the hungry, as if people in Egypt had not talked about it at Tahrir Square in 2011 (Talab 2011; Al-Marakbi 2012; Algareda 2011). These three discourses had a significant impact on concepts such as hope for better economic conditions, inclusion of the poor and social justice among Egyptian citizens. Moreover, economic activities were disrupted after the January revolution, especially under constant state security breakdown leading to the disruption of tourism, which is one of the most important hard currency earners in the Egyptian economy. This has jeopardized the whole transformational process posing political transformation versus economic challenges.

Freedom

Freedom, the second word on the banner, represents hope and change for the better. It does not necessarily mean freedom of speech and the full package of fundamental human rights. It does not also mean that the Egyptian people consider or fully grasp the meaning of a democratic system as a substitution for the existing one. At the time of the demonstrations in Cairo, people from all spectrums of society chanted the word freedom; for a while, the word acted as a unifying concept. However, after Husni Mubarak was ousted, it became clear that the concept of "freedom" meant very different things for different people. For the Salafis, it meant an Islamic state, and for the secularists a secular state, and so on and so forth. The concept of freedom also relates to cultural and historical issues such as the struggle for freedom against colonialism and the establishment of an independent state. While such struggle for freedom was sometimes articulated in Pan-Arab, liberalist, socialist or communist terms, it was also articulated in religious terms seeking ideological and political alternatives in Islam to socialism, liberalism, communism, secularism etc. (Lapidus 1997; Roy 1998).

Let's take Islamic movements as an example. While the dictators of Egypt - be it Faruk, Nasser, Sadat or Mubarak - suppressed Islamic movements and vehemently supported the enforcement of secularization and marginalization of Islam in educational and legal systems, these movements were active in the social life of the Egyptian society (Lapidus 1997). Such oppression forced these movements to discreetly work and organize to reach their goals (regardless of what they might be). Hassan Al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928, pushed revivalism in Egypt to a different level. He influenced his subsequent revivalist movements in Egypt to engage in politics, especially in the 1970s when Sadat released Muslim Brotherhood prisoners to counterbalance the leftists and Nasserites, who criticized his neo-liberal policies (Ramadan 1993:167).

While globalization is considered as an extension of colonialism, Islamic movements opposed it representing a modern reaction against imperialist assault (Halliday 2005). Thus, Islamic movements were organized under oppressive regimes to address several issues such as rescuing their societies from Western-dominated regimes and offering them divine salvation. In other words, Islamic movements made strenuous efforts toward freedom by enforcing Quran and the "Sunna" [The tradition of the prophet Mohammad], committing to Islam and retuning to Sharia, helping the poor and returning women to their traditional family roles, and gradually Islamizing the society (Ayyub 1980; Cudsi 1981; Roy 1998; Abu Rabi' 1996).

Therefore, based on cultural and historical meanings, signifiers in Image 1 pose different meanings for different people. Moderate and radical Islamists saw in freedom the concept of the Islamic state and the emancipation of the corrupt and secular rule. As the concept of freedom meant Islamic state for Islamists, it meant freedom from authoritarian regime for some, whereas it meant freedom from poverty or unemployment for others. People at Tahrir Square mounted banners and drawings asking Mubarak to step down in an attempt to be free. When that happened on February 11, 2011, the definition of freedom was boiling up in the Egyptian political discourse.

Human dignity

"Human dignity," the third phrase on the banner, which was later substituted by "social justice," signifies that Egyptians have developed a sense of identity - an Egyptian identity by which human dignity should be respec-

ted and protected (See Images 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8). The dignity of a person is not only a fundamental right in itself but constitutes the real basis of other fundamental rights. Human dignity is essential for the foundation of human rights and relates to the right to live, right to integrity, justice, equality, prohibition of torture and slavery etc. While Egyptians were suffering from all of these violations, the phrase “human dignity” has its roots, more likely mixed with pain and sorrow, in the Egyptian society.

Based on historical and cultural connotations, “human dignity” has different meanings to people from different spectrums of the Egyptian society. For instance, the criteria a conservative Muslim has to preserve dignity (which reaches its peak when talking about Allah, the prophet Mohammad or the Quran) does not necessarily match that of a conservative Christian.

Historically, Egyptians suffered from the repressive regime, which inflicted torture and disrespect on Egyptian citizens such as the increased number of arrests under contingency law provisions, the significant amount of death sentences, the severe restrictions on professional organizations, and violations of human rights.

Culturally, the concept of human dignity is very important for the Egyptian society. It is often used in everyday language. There are several common sayings related to this concept such as: “Everything except my dignity” [lit. Kulshaiillakaramti]. This means that people can accept everything in life except the violation of their dignity.

For many Egyptians, I speculate, dignity addresses fundamental rights such as freedom of speech, assembly, religion etc. However, this unified vision ends when they disagree on what taboos are, which might be morally, religiously or/and traditionally sanctioned for some and open for discussion for others. In other words, the volume matters - to which extent human dignity can be guaranteed. A good example can be the issue of homosexuality. Homosexuality is either considered a disease or an anomaly in the Egyptian society. Thus, based on this vision of human dignity, homosexuals do not have the fundamental rights mentioned above. Their behavior should be corrected. In the frame of discussing freedom and human dignity, this issue has recently come to the debate in Egypt. Prominent religious figures such as inter alia Mahmoud Shaaban, Al-habib Al-jifri and Ahmad Al-Tayeb recognized such an “immoral” act to exist only if the person (a homosexual)

does not explicitly express his or her sexual orientation in public (Anwar 2011; Al-Hafez 2013; Al-Bawaba 2014).

In conclusion, during the 18 days of the uprising that toppled President Husni Mubarak - protester chanted “bread, freedom, human dignity and social justice”. This slogan, which was considered the slogan of the January revolution, contributed to unifying people at Tahrir Square producing semantic structures more complicated than it was anticipated. The same words had different meanings and conveyed different messages to their receivers. They functioned as a catalyst of unity and division simultaneously.

Second image: Power and Empowerment

The next photograph addresses power balance and the role of women at Tahrir Square demonstrations.

Image 2. Women demonstrating at Tahrir Square: “Husni Mubarak” on the right and “85 million” on the left. © Mohammad Maroof / Egypt Independent (AlmasriAlyawm).

Power

This photograph was captured in a public setting at Tahrir Square in Cairo and addresses one of the most important issues in the revolution, and that is power. The drawing signifies the change of power balance in favor of the people toward more justice and equality. While Mubarak's power used to be stronger than that of the whole society, the roles have changed and the people are gaining power now. The signifiers are: the scale, the phrases "Husni Mubarak" and the "85 million". This sketch, like many other similar slogans and sketches emerged during the 18-day protest at Tahrir Square, introduces a clear message (signified meaning) - the power balance has already changed and people can decide who remains in power and who does not. (See also Images 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, and 16). Before the demonstrations started, the president Mubarak and his political party had had the upper hand in Egypt. During the momentum of protests, the walls of fear were fading and people started feeling the strength. This change in perception has produced an unthinkable message for Egyptians - "we can make a difference".

State practices under the command of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces, Mohammad Morsi, the interim Mohammad Mansour or Abdulfattah Al-Sisi remained entrapped in the old authoritarian mentality of Mubarak and his entourage. The change of power balance was not deep enough to sustain real changes. Again, a concept that was popular during the demonstrations faded because people had to choose between conflicting political powers, namely between the military and its internal allies, and the Muslim Brotherhood. A division in the society followed the division of labor between those who control security, the military, political institutions and those who control ideological networks. In other words, people have been engaged in the schematizing the steps of the transformational process at the expense of their collective goal.

Women role

Women from all walks of life participated in demonstrations at Tahrir Square. However, in this photograph, we see an elderly veiled woman holding a piece of paper and chanting in favor of the demonstrations. According to the conservative and traditional preferences of the Egyptian society, women, old and young, tend to gather in groups separate from men. The fact that these women are veiled signifies that they are from the more conservative side of the spectrum. Based on the type and color of their veils, they cannot be supporters of any Salafi factions. Otherwise, they should have had black Burkas covering their faces (See Image 13). If we consider the sketch on the paper as a message and combine it with what the women in

the whole photograph are wearing (another message), we will conclude that these women are more likely to be supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood. Especially the concept of justice, which is very clear in the sketch, is also a core concept of the Muslim Brotherhood's ideology.

While women are protesting against the regime's injustice, a clear message comes across - women play a role in the decision making process and will be empowered after the revolution as they are now. This is significant because it grants legitimacy to the social action at Tahrir Square and enables participants to generate several messages within and across the borders. The most important message is to persuade the international community to support the demonstrations against their long-standing ally - Husni Mubarak.

In conclusion, power and empowerment are central for meaning production. The understanding of the mass culture has changed, and with it, the concept of power. During the demonstrations, Egyptians started talking about the will of people, women empowerment, justice and equality. Unfortunately these concepts lost their brightness too soon, predominantly because they collided with traditional roles of men and women, taboos and the understanding of the relationship between politics and religion.

Third image: Repression and Representation

Image 3. Demonstrators at Tahrir Square. The banner says: That's what you have given Egypt ... what is new? ... Enough! From right to left: Repression - forgery - corruption - deception - looting - cancer - poverty - ignorance [lit. hatha ma qaddamtumoohlmasr... famaaljadeed?...kafa! From right to left: Aljah! - Alfaqr - Alsaratan - Alnabh - Altadleel - Alfasad - Altazweer - Alqahr]. © Mohammad Maroof / Egypt Independent (Almasri-Alyawm).

This photograph was captured at Tahrir Square right after Mubarak had stepped down in February 11, 2011. While the banner is “professionally” made, which necessitates financial resources for production, the setting and the photograph are spontaneous. This banner represents the resistance and criticism against the remaining symbols of the old regime. The banner addresses important issues the Egyptian society suffers from such as “repression, forgery, corruption, deception, looting, cancer, poverty and ignorance”.

Behind the tents, there are hundreds of protesters chanting against the Egyptian regime. In this photograph, we can see men, women and children participating in the demonstration. However, the male dominance in the photograph still shows that men play a more important role in this protest. Women do not lead the chants but stand on the side along with younger people. The participation of women and children adds two qualities to the protests: Peacefulness and legitimacy. It is peaceful because even children, perhaps with their families, are protesting, which implies that people (men) are not assembling at Tahrir Square to violently confront police forces. It is legitimate because families' joining the protests implies that the demands of the people at Tahrir Square do not only represent one group, one gender or one political party. Their demands represent all Egyptians (See Images 14 and 16).

The banner signifies that Mubarak has been already removed. His removal was signified by drawing an (X) on his photo (See also Image 15). The wording is in two languages: Arabic and English. This reflects the centrality of the language at the times of the uprising. People at Tahrir Square were not only communicating with Egyptians, whose language is predominantly Arabic, but were also communicating with the outside world, using English as an international language (See also Images 5 and 15). The phrase and question “That's what you have given Egypt ... what is new?” is directly addressing the leading figures of Mubarak's regime in an attempt to hold them accountable. Moreover, an answer was given for the question, which

is: "Enough!" This answer implies that Egyptians cannot take it anymore and that they are determined to speak their minds and get rid of authoritarianism.

Photos of ministers and leading figures in Egypt were shown on the banner. Each one of them was given a value that matches his role in reality. For instance, the word "repression" was given to Omar Mahmoud Suleiman, a leading figure in Egypt's intelligence, and the word "looting" was given to Ahmed Ezz, an Egyptian businessman and the former chairman of Egypt's national budget committee and so on and so forth. Under the rule of Mubarak, these individuals represented the government, after the removal of Mubarak; they represented the old corrupt regime. The signified meaning in this photograph, as many mounted at Tahrir Square, alters the balance of power inside Egypt. People are claiming power and building up meanings to produce new signifying practices that had not been used before (See also Images 13, 14, 15 and 16).

Historically, Egypt suffered from political and economic hardships. This banner, therefore, expresses many of the concerns Egyptians shared at Tahrir Square. Mass communication media, globalization and easy access to information brought peoples' awareness to matters such as prosperity, work integrity, transparency and good governance etc. The access to information was not, however, the driver for people to demand their rights, but it was a crucial tool for Egyptians to articulate their demands and compare their political, economic, and social conditions to the world.

While the banner in the photograph tackles a wide range of equally important issues for Egypt, I will be extending only on repression for demonstration. Repression in Egypt has been a key policy to control political opposition. The level of spending on security issues attests that repression had become an essential tool to protect authoritarian regimes in the late 1990s. According to the Physical Integrity Rights Index, an additive index constructed from the torture, extrajudicial killing, political imprisonment, and disappearance indicators and ranges from zero (no government respect for these four rights) to eight (full government respect for these four rights), Egypt scored a decreasing respect of human rights and physical integrity from six in 1985 down to two in 2010 (Cingranelli and Richards 2010). Autocrats aimed to maximize their dwindling assets by dividing citizens

into groups that benefited from co-optation while others were subject to repression. Repression was constant and has been increasing in most Arab countries since independence.

However, this brings us to the issue of representation, which focuses on the question of “how the world is socially constructed and represented to and by us in meaningful ways” (Barker 2011:8). These meanings and signifying practices “are produced, enacted, used and understood in specific social contexts” (Barker 2011:8). The leading figures shown on the banner represented the regime in the past and more likely benefited from co-optation. While they represented the legitimate government in the socially constructed meanings under the rule of Mubarak, they represented “repression, forgery, corruption, deception, looting, cancer, poverty and ignorance” in the newly produced social contexts.

Egyptians created and constructed such meanings in relation to their social context, which has historical and cultural roots. The protesters produced semantic structures, by which they represented legitimacy. The government, which repressed Egyptians for decades by the coercion of police forces and intelligence agents, is no longer representative for the Egyptian people. It is Egyptians, as signified by the photograph, who represent themselves and dare to say to the government there is repression, corruption etc.

The concepts of “repression, forgery, corruption, deception, looting, cancer, poverty and ignorance,” united people at the times of the demonstrations. These concepts triggered collective action because they represented a common suffering of Egyptian people. Again, such concepts divided Egyptians in the transformational process. Unfortunately, the understanding of these concepts was limited by the lack of debate to define the meaning of repression, corruption or any of these concepts. On June 30, 2013, two years after the 2011 revolution, people drove again to protest against the Islamist president Morsi, the first democratically elected president in the Egyptian history. The military, under the command of General Abdulfattah Al-Sisi deposed Mohammad Morsi and launched a repressive crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood. Few hours later, the chief justice of Egypt’s Supreme Constitutional Court Adly Mansour was appointed to be Egypt’s interim president to launch a transitional process towards new “democratic elections”. Repression remains tempestuous in Egypt. People tolerate repression when it is against other dissenting parties but criticize it when it is inflicted against their own.

Conclusion

As was shown from the analysis of the photographs, the semantic structures of people's demands and messages worked as catalysts to initially unite them against authoritarianism but then to fragment them. Unifying because every party or individual saw their own understanding in these concepts, and thus, joined the momentum to form a collective action. Fragmenting because of the lack of previous debates to define the underlying concepts of these messages. Such debates have not occurred yet in Egyptian discourses. While they are still lacking, the traditional discourses remained intact.

People marched to Tahrir Square with simple demands but were entrapped in a transformation process replete with polarization. People drew on some words from Egyptian historical and cultural contexts and gave them meanings based on their own understanding.

The political and religious polarization processes Egypt witnessed after the removal of Mubarak, followed by the sheer control of the army, then by the strong hold of the Muslim Brotherhood on power, then by the army again, increased violations of human right to dramatize the functions of unification and fragmentation.

Several years have already passed and people's demands still have not been crystallized yet. Political constructs are not of a better quality; economic growth is wobbling and freedoms of journalism, speech and expression have become worse.

The uncertain future of Egypt cordially invited Islamists to the political landscape and intensely eliminated them. The semantic structures constructed by Egyptians at Tahrir Square primarily signified that not only Egyptians are ready to coalesce and cooperate to reach their goals and reconstruct their efforts but also ready to coordinate and collide while doing so.

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Appendix

Image 4. Egyptian demonstrators mounting the slogan "bread - freedom and human dignity" [lit. khobz - huriyya - karama insaniyya] at Tala'at Harb Square close to Tahrir Square in Cairo. Photo was taken on 11 February 2011. © Image: Mohammad Abdulghani.

Image 5. A group of young ladies carrying a large banner saying “bread - freedom - human dignity” [lit. khobz - huriyya - karama insaniyya] in Tahrir Square on 01 February 2011. ©

Image: Osama M. Hijji.

Image 6. The slogan in black and red writing says “Bread, Freedom, Dignity” [lit. khbz, huriyya, karama] on a wall of the rear of the Mogamma, a huge government administrative building on Tahrir Square. Picture was taken on 12 February 2011. © AlisdareHickson/ Flickr.

Image 7. Demonstrator's demands on a piece of paper in Tahrir Square: "bread - freedom - social justice - human dignity" [lit. aish - huriyya - adala ijtimaiyya - karama insaniyya]. Photo was taken on 25 January 2012. @ Image: May Mustafa F.R/Flickr.

Image 8. Graffiti on Cairo streets: "bread - freedom - social justice" [lit. aish - huriyya - adala ijtimaiyya]. Photo was published on 25 December 2012 by Reise Journal. @ Image: Aysha Selim.

Image 9. Man protesting the scarcity of bread rations suffering from tear gas exposure downtown Cairo in Marouf Street near the junction with Tala'at Harb. "flee and leave, we are unable to find a loaf of bread [lit. Ihrobirhalyanazeef, mush la'yeenhattaalrageef] Again and again during the 18 days of the uprising that toppled President Mubarak - the cry went up from the protesters "Bread, freedom and social justice". The picture was taken on Angry Friday 28 January 2011. ©AlisdareHickson/ Flickr.

Image 10. Demonstrators at Tahrir Square complain about the scarcity of food: "People are hungry" [lit. Alshab ja'aan]. Picture was taken on 20 April 2012. Abdo / Flickr.

Image 11. Demonstrators continue protesting at Tahrir Square: "Our demands is the Freedom to form political parties - Glory to the martyrs" [matalibunahuriyyattakweenalahzab - almajdlilshuhada'a]. Taken on February 19, 2011. © yoppa1/ Flickr.

Image 12. A group of women demonstrating at Tahrir Square in reference to the change of power balance: "Smart Hosni" [lit. Yikhrob betu athka ikhwatu]. This picture was taken on February 11, 2011. © HussamKotb/ Flickr.

Image 13. A woman demonstrating at Thir Square on January 30, 2011: “Mubaraks regime is illegitimate” [lit. nizam Mubarak batel]. © Image:SebastienMoros/ Flickr.

Image 14. A group of women demonstrating at tahrir Square on February 1, 2011. The phrase written in red on the left says: “We stand our grounds until the corrupt leaves” [lit. samidoon hatta yarhal alfased]. The phrase written in green says: “Egyptians, resist!” [qoom ya masri]. © Image:Essam Sharaf/Flickr.

Image 15. People at Tahrir Square asking Mubarak to step down on January 29, 2011. While the content of the message is shocking in an Egyptian context, the fact that people dared to make such a statement and hold it up to a camera without any attempt to hide their identity is unprecedented in Egypt. @ Image: Alisdare Hickson/Flickr.

Image 16. Peaceful anti-Mubarak demonstrations on Tuesday February 01, 2011. Thousands gathered peacefully at Tahrir Square before Mubarak gave his “love his country” speech. The banner says “Mubarak, leave!” [lit. Irhal Mubarak!]. © Image: Zadokite/ Flickr.