



# CyberOrient

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## Slamming the “Continuing” Moroccan Revolution: Noussayba Lahlou’s Bittersweet Verses

Maha Tazi

Concordia University

### Abstract:

*In this article, I am interested in looking at women’s current mobilization techniques in Post-Arab Spring North Africa. To do so, I draw from the existing literature on the case of Egypt which identifies women’s contemporary resistance in creative disobedience patterns – that is women’s art activism that advocates, concomitantly, for social justice and gender equality. In my attempt to fill an existing gap in the literature, I investigate the existence of such resistance patterns in Morocco, as well as their main characteristics and country specificities. Because (slam) poetry is a traditionally resistant genre in the Arab region, I take as a case study Noussayba Lahlou’s slam poetry to explore the political potential of women’s slams to advocate for women’s rights and sociopolitical liberties in post-Arab Spring Morocco. To do so, I conducted a virtual interview with the artist by administering a structured online questionnaire, alongside a content analysis of eight of her most recent and salient slams. A 24-years-old slam poet from Morocco, Noussayba’s revolutionary verses tackle widespread regime abuse and corruption, alongside women’s rights and many other social woes in the country.*

### Keywords:

*Arab Spring, Gender Paradox, Subaltern Counterpublics, Creative Disobedience, Art Activism, Social Justice, Gender Equality*

### Introduction

In December 2010, the self-burning of a street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, in his native town of Sidi Bouzid, arguably marked the start of the Tunisian revolution and the beginning of the events now known as the *Arab Spring*. This series of uprisings aimed to overthrow authoritarian regimes across the Middle East and North African (MENA) region

through both violent and non-violent protests, coups, and demonstrations. Almost a decade today following the outbreak of the Arab Spring, many feminist and Middle Eastern scholars still wonder what Arab societies have gained from the long and perilous walk towards “democracy,” and whether the Arab uprisings particularly have constituted a significant step forward, or the opposite, for the women’s movement in the MENA region.

In a report entitled “North African Women’s Rights in the Aftermath of the Arab Spring,” Fatima Sadiqi (2014, 305) discusses a *paradoxical situation* that characterized the Arab uprisings, where there has been a spectacular street presence of women from all ages and social statuses during the series of protests, but where women have subsequently been excluded from political representation and decision-making in the aftermath of these revolutions. Kharroub (2016, 1) describes this paradoxical situation as the *gender paradox* of the Arab Spring. Ten years after the start of the Arab Spring, women’s systemic oppression in the region has persisted until the present day, which makes it even more relevant to look at women’s current mobilization and resistance tactics as both a response and a potential “way out” of oppression. In fact, because North African women have faced a significant backlash against their political, social and legal rights in the aftermath of these revolutions, female artist–activists (i.e. *artist-activists*) are currently developing effective tactics of resistance and subversion to *talk back* to the gender paradox and continue advocating for gender equality and social justice, concomitantly (Badran 2016; Wahba 2016). In this article, I take the blatant *gender paradox* of the Arab Spring as a point of departure to analyze the contemporary state of North African – and particularly Moroccan – women’s rights, in terms of women’s agency, creativity, and *continued* resistance in the face of both political oppression and gender-based discrimination.

In fact, Morocco had a unique experience of the Arab Spring given that the February 20 Movement (MV20F) for individual freedoms and socio-political liberties did not directly advocate for a change of regime – unlike most revolutionary movements in other Arab countries – but called, instead, for genuine constitutional reforms that would trigger effective

and sustainable social change in the country (Abadi 2014). However, the adoption of mere “cosmetic” constitutional reforms by the regime in June 2011 aimed, primarily, to contain the enthusiasm of the protestors and the cycle of contention created by the MV20F, thereby revealing the failure of the local revolutionary movement in bringing about effective social change (Boutkhil 2016; Daadaoui 2017). In fact, the MV20F gradually waned in the months following the adoption of the new constitution before dying out completely in 2012, at the same time as the new constitution revealed its failure, on the long run, to effectively disrupt the status-quo and meet the protesters demands, namely on the issues of human rights and gender equality (Boutkhil 2016) thereby revealing another specificity of the “Moroccan Spring” (i.e. the MV20F) which has been effectively co-opted by the regime.

The existing literature which documents and analyzes women’s *creative disobedience* patterns in Post-Arab Spring North Africa focuses primarily on Egypt where women *artists* have been resorting to poetry, theater, music, dance, and graffiti to protest the ongoing social and gender inequalities in their country (cooke 2016; El Nossery 2016). These creative resistance forms by women emerged particularly following the toppling of Mubarak’s regime in 2011 and the 2013 military coup against the ensuing Morsi’s Islamist government, persisting up to the present day under El Sissi’s military dictatorship (Sadiqi 2016). Therefore, drawing on the prolific literature on the case of Egypt, including Margot Badran’s (2014; 2016) ideas of women’s creative disobedience and the *continuing revolution*, in addition to Dina Wahba’s (2016) concept of women’s emergent *subaltern counterpublics*, my objective is to investigate the new spheres that are currently being created by Moroccan women to denounce their ongoing exclusion from the public sphere.

Because poetry and its contemporary equivalent (slam poetry) have long traditions of resistance in the Arab region, I take a woman slam poet artist as a case study in this article to investigate the idea of the *continuing gender revolution* in Morocco particularly. I ask, what is the political potential of women’s slam poetry to advocate for both women’s rights

and social justice in post-“revolutionary” Morocco? Noussayba Lahlou, a young 24-years-old slam poet from Morocco is revolutionizing the art scene today with her bittersweet slam that tackles widespread social inequalities, alongside regime abuse and gender inequality in the country.

## Literature review

### **On the origins of Arab women’s activism: anti-colonial activism, women’s exclusion in post-independence states and contemporary intersectional activism**

Fatima Sadiqi (2016) notes that North African women’s activism precedes the digital revolution and the Arab Spring and can be traced back at least to the late nineteenth century, where women played active roles in their countries’ accession to independence during the long years of resistance against imperialism and colonial rule. Moha Ennaji (2016) identifies the origins of Moroccan women’s activism in the early years of the French Protectorate (i.e. the 1910s) when feminist activists were fighting on two fronts simultaneously: for women’s rights and the liberation of their country. However, Nadje Al-Ali (2000) argues that, in the context of Arab women’s activism against imperialism, nationalist struggles have often taken precedence over feminist causes. She highlights the contradiction between women’s active mobilization in pro-independence struggles and their exclusion in the aftermath of the revolutions. Therefore, Badran (2016) brings an additional perspective and underscores that North African women’s activism actually finds its origins not in the fight against colonial rule per se, but in nation-building projects that typically excluded women. For example, the creation of the *Egyptian Feminist Union* in the wake of the country’s independence in 1922 marked the birth of the feminist movement in Egypt, in a context where women were denied political rights after independence despite them being at the forefront of the nationalist struggle against British colonial rule.

Recent events have spurred the ideal conditions for the resurgence of Arab women’s activism where their contributions are once again needed, this

time to put an end – not to colonial rule but – to authoritarian regimes throughout the region. miriam cooke (2012) emphasizes the particularly high visibility (and large number) of women during the Arab Spring uprisings, while Wahba (2016) highlights Arab women’s leading roles before, during and after the Arab Spring. More specifically, Dina Hosni (2017) discusses the pivotal roles women played at three important stages of the uprisings thanks to their strategic use of digital technologies: First, during the mobilization phase, when women called on other people to join the protests. Second, women were active in the documentation of the events and experiences of the revolutions, and finally, in the cultural dissemination phase, where women activists have been able to promote a culture of an active citizenry and move from critiquing to contributing to social justice and the development of their societies. Echoing her phrase “Defying Regime, Defying patriarchy,” Wahba’s (2016, 67) suggests that in defying authoritarianism during the Arab uprisings, women not only sought the removal of the ruler but all systems of oppression. In this sense, Badran argues that: “rebellious women had to, and did, confront the authoritarianism of the *patriarchal* state, the *patriarchal* society, and the *patriarchal* family” (2016, 53). Corroborating this intersectional analysis of Arab women’s mobilization during the uprisings, Hanan Sabea (2012) posits that the famous phrase “Isqat El Nizam!” (Topple the Regime!) was directed not at the ruler alone, but at a whole system of economic, social, and political oppression in which women felt alienated. Therefore, Elham Gheytaichi and Valentine Moghadam (2014, 2) conclude that Arab women’s movements and broader social movements have become “intertwined social phenomena” in the context of the Arab Spring, where feminist activists also played leading roles in advocating for regime change and social justice.

### **The gender paradox of the Arab spring and the *continuing gender revolution* today**

However, Sadiqi points out the “paradoxical situation” that characterized women’s involvement during and after the series of (Arab) uprisings; she observes: “On the one hand, there was a spectacular street presence of women



of all ages, ideologies, ethnicities and social statuses during the political mobilization phases of the uprisings, which has been well documented by all types of *media*, but, on the other hand, these women were then excluded from decision-making posts after the uprisings” (2014, 305). Kharroub (2016, 1) describes such a paradoxical situation as the “gender paradox” of the Arab Spring where women’s hopes of achieving equal access to the public sphere thanks to their active contributions to the series of protests have quickly been shattered away by conservative (Islamist) forces that rose to power in post-revolutionary Arab states; these forces include the *Muslim Brotherhood* in Egypt, the *Ennahda Party* in Tunisia and the *Justice and Development Party* (PJD) in Morocco. For instance, one of the first endeavors of the PJD directly following its election in November 2011 concerned the rejection of the *Government Agenda for Equality 2011–2015* that was launched by the previous government (Boutkhil 2016). In fact, Névine El Nossery (2016), Moha Ennaji (2016) and Moushira Khattab (2016) observe how a gender paradox was evident not only in North African women’s lower levels of political representation and access to decision-making in the aftermath of the uprisings, but also in the backlash against women’s legal rights in the new constitutions (including the limitations on women’s divorce and custody rights and the restoration of the long-dated practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGMs) in Egypt and the foregrounding of complementary not equal roles of men and women in the newly adopted Egyptian and Tunisian constitutions), and, finally, in the rise of extreme forms of violence directed at female protesters in the post-revolutionary contexts. These forms included the widespread gang rapes and virginity tests on women protesters in Egypt, the arbitrary jailing and torture of Tunisian women activists and the dissuading death threats on Moroccan women activists to be active in the MV20F. (Errazzouki 2012; Wahba 2016; Yachoulti 2015)

Marwan Kraidy (2016, 2017) coins the concepts of *creative insurgency* and *revolutionary creative labor*, which he defines as a mixture of activism and artfulness that forges a new revolutionary identity, to characterize the nature of activist dissent during the Arab Spring. He refers to the various forms of resistance practices, including street art, graffiti, cartoons, political

rap, videography, satire, slogans, digital memes, and mash-ups that activists and journalists mobilized in the context of the uprisings to denounce regime abuse and corruption. Highlighting their ingenious and inventive character, Kraidy (2016, 2017) argues that such creative forms of activism continue to characterize contemporary patterns of dissent in Arab political life. Similarly, Badran (2014, 2016) uses the term *creative disobedience* to underscore that creativity is increasingly becoming a basic revolutionary tool for Egyptian women today to denounce *systemic oppression* and promote culture and gender transformation as part of an ongoing revolutionary process. She discusses the *longue durée* of revolutionary struggle in the Arab region, which goes back to colonial times, up to the *ongoing* 2011 revolution today, and describes the gender (and cultural) revolution as an ongoing process which exists both in “the before” and “the after” of the political revolutions of the Arab Spring. Therefore, taking Egypt as a case study, she characterizes women’s activism in post-revolutionary North African states as a “*continuing revolution*.” Badran (2016) derives her understanding of revolutions as “continuous” from Arendt’s (1990) notion that (political) revolutions usually constitute new beginnings.

### **The rise of women’s counterpublics and creative disobedience in post-Arab Spring revolutionary states**

Wabha (2016) points out that the Arab Spring and its aftermath constitute another national project through which Egyptians, particularly women, are reinventing themselves and redefining their national identity. Describing women’s contemporary struggle as a *continuum*, she uses the term *subaltern counterpublics* to characterize the new spheres that are currently being created and inhabited by women to *continue* denouncing the ongoing social and gender inequalities in their country: “As film directors, journalists, publishers, magazine editors, and members of organizations and research groups, women are producing alternative narratives that challenge gender norms in their societies” (2016, 66). El Nossery (2016) also observes how Egyptian women *artists* are increasingly resorting to poetry, theater, music, dance, storytelling, sketches, graffiti, and various street performances to produce alternative narratives that promote and trigger

social transformation. She argues that, in this context, women's creative expressions are another means to promote struggle, denounce oppression, mobilize people, and raise consciousness, where women are "leading a parallel artistic revolution that unfolded underground via rhizomatic machinery – clandestine and often anonymous and yet everywhere – and created what Deleuze and Guattari have dubbed 'strange new becomings, new polyvocalities'" (2016, 145). For instance, one of the most popular forms of feminist activism in Egypt today is the graffiti movement. cooke (2016) and El Nossery underscore how the *Women on Walls (Wow)* movement is an enlightening case of women's *subaltern counterpublics* in post-revolutionary Arab countries, where female graffiti artists have been painting Cairo's walls to share and raise awareness about their painful stories of the revolution, including domestic violence, sexual harassment, lack of equal opportunities, female genital mutilation, and the necessity to carry on both the political and the feminist revolutions today. El Nossery (2016) discusses several such examples such as Shihadeh and Zeff's stencil "Circle of Hell" in reference to the horrors of mass sexual assault faced by female protesters in Egypt, and the stencil by an unknown artist that reads "You can't break me" which celebrates the case of Samira Ibrahim, a female protestor who brought a court case against the military for subjecting her to a so-called virginity test. Other examples include women's presence in installation art in post-revolutionary contexts. Badran (2014) discusses Egyptian artist Huda Lutfi's piece "Continuing" which depicts the revolution as a woman that stands half decapitated among the mutilated; at the 2014 Cairo exhibition, one can see a female torso standing with a head sliced off at the top and covered in bands that repeat the word *Al-Mustamirra* (Continuing), as a reference to the *continuing* revolution. Finally, women's music and literary works have also been part and parcel of the process of social change. El Nossery (2016) refers to Dina El Wedidi, a female street singer who has gained popularity in Egypt since the uprisings of 2011, thanks to her thoughtful lyrics that pack a political punch and her call for self-realization. In fact, cook discusses how Arab women's writing has particularly been productive in the wake of the revolutions: "Beyond social change, writing may also produce new identities, turning activists into artist-activists" (2016, 43).

In addition to Egyptian women *activists*, women activists in Yemen (and other parts of the Arab world) have also been producing counter-hegemonic discourses, notably through poetry, to denounce the outbreak of the war in the country when, in 2015, a coalition of states led by Saudi Arabia and supported by the United States intervened to reclaim Yemen on behalf of the internationally recognized government against the Iranian-backed Shia Houthi rebel-group which swept down the country with the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2012 to denounce widespread corruption in the administration of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. These Yemeni women's poems provide critical discussions about rebuilding the nation after the war and the necessity to achieve peace – namely through their opposition to the Saudi Intervention in Yemen and the promotion of a national consensus to resolve the conflict (Wadekar 2018). Therefore, as cooke concludes: “It is not in the toppling of presidents for life or in ballot boxes or in new constitutions that the success or persistence of revolutions can be detected, but rather in *the continuity* of [Arab] women's revolutionary activism, consciousness, and creativity” (2016, 43).

## Theoretical framework

### Postcolonial Arabo–Muslim feminism

Postcolonial feminist analyses, which challenge the dominant narrative of the victimhood and powerlessness of Arab and Muslim women, serve as the point of departure for my research (Abu-Lughod 2002; Hijri 2014; Khan 1998; Razack 2008; Yeğenoğlu 1998). Drawing on postcolonial theory, Arab and Muslim feminist scholars have denounced the narrative of powerlessness that is usually ascribed to Arab women which perpetuates the stereotype that Muslim women are helpless victims in need of Western imperial liberation due to their double-minority status – the Arab minority vis-à-vis the white dominant majority and the female minority within the Arab male-dominated community. Intersectionality was first introduced by Crenshaw (1991) to theorize such interlocking axes of oppression – including race, gender but also sexual orientation, ableism, et cetera – for women from marginalized groups which tend to increase

their systemic vulnerability. Postcolonial Arabo–Muslim feminism also denounces the Orientalist Western assumptions that Arab women are complicit in their own oppression (Al-Rawi 2014). Drawing on feminist accounts of women’s agency and a decolonizing theoretical framework, my study constitutes a part of this oppositional discourse in challenging this simplistic and reductionist view which fails to capture the complexity of the social realities in the region and the extent to which women are able to mobilize and organize themselves in order to promote effective and sustainable social change, thereby invoking Lila Abu-Lughod’s famous rhetorical question: “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?” (2002, 1). In fact, both Valentine Moghadam (2010) and Monika Mokhrejee (2005) stress Middle Eastern women’s growing agency through their unique strategies for empowerment and their effective use of tactics of negotiation with various regimes of power, from international organizations to state institutions and local NGOs.

### **Art as alternative media**

Theodor Adorno (1991) develops two visions on art. He conceives of artistic production as either hegemonic (i.e. mainstream) or counterculture (i.e. alternative). He considers that the purpose of revolutionary and countercultural art rests precisely on highlighting and heightening social discord because of its “immanently critical” character, whereby it strives to enable greater human freedom and achieve social justice by challenging the hegemonic system. Levine (2015) posits that art as alternative media creates niches for subcultures and countercultures and becomes particularly important to challenge the power of repressive regimes when civil society has little space for protest; he goes on: “Groups of (usually) marginalized young people, drawn together by common cultural tastes (in music, modes of dress, styles of speech, etc.) and performances, gradually articulate a powerful oppositional political vision that challenges authoritarian state power” (2015, 1278). Echoing African American writer Toni Cade Bambara’s famous phrase that “the duty of the radical artist is to make the revolution irresistible,” Levine argues that all great art is by nature revolutionary and all revolutions must have their own art (2015, 1283).

He reasons that “art has always been a handmaiden to revolution and culture its fuel” (2015, 1278). Levine also argues that, because of their essentially performative and affective character, artistic and cultural productions have a substantial power to draw people into political mobilization.

### **(Slam) poetry as a traditionally resistant genre in the MENA region**

While Levine (2015, 1289) posits that poetry has always been the most ancient and preferred form of expression in Arab civilization, the contemporary equivalent of poetry today is “slam” – or street poetry. This genre flourished in the early 1990s worldwide to address issues of race and gender. Poetry as a genre also flourished in the context of the Arab Spring to denounce regime abuse and corruption (Levine 2015). In fact, Levine argues that poetry suffuses most other art forms in revolutionary struggles as “everything is poetry,” from the slogans chanted by masses of protestors to the rhymes dropped by musicians and the captions written by political cartoonists. Underscoring the core role of affects not only in art but in all revolutionary upsurges, he highlights the affective power of poetry – “tarab” in Arabic – in triggering both pleasure and reciprocation of emotion between performers and their audiences (2015, 1282). Levine also emphasizes the unique historical role of poetry within Arabo-Islamic culture and Arabic language, from classical Arab poetry to modern poetry and hip-hop. He discusses the historical role of poetry in Arab nationalist struggles and politics where poetry was almost an “antibody” against authoritarian regimes and human rights abuses, as well as the most recent role of hip-hop, which is almost the sung equivalent of slam poetry, as the most favored cultural forms of the Arab revolutionary youth today. Similarly, in *Muslim Networks from Hajj to Hip Hop*, cooke and Lawrence (2005) argue that against the backdrop of the Orientalist trope which aims to champion Western civilization by framing Muslims (in the Media) as regressive outsiders who reject modernity, 21st century Muslim hip-hop, a genre that is very much similar to slam poetry, has emerged as one of the major networks for Islamic identity to contest this Orientalist frame and provide a counter-hegemonic discourse which foregrounds social cohesion in Islamic societies and a deep awareness of and sensibility about social

justice issues. For instance, in 2014, Sana al-Yemen, a then 23-year-old journalism graduate born in Yemen and raised in London, composed an anti-ISIS poem which went viral on YouTube to denounce the atrocities and human rights violations committed by the Islamic State in Northern Iraq. Titled “This is not my Islam: a message to ISIS,” the poem aimed to provide an alternative discourse on Islam and Muslims, one that promotes peace and social unity and rejects the extremist ideology of Islamist Wahhabism (Finn 2015). Amal Kassir, a Syrian–American slam poet also defies the dominant Western stereotypes which depict veiled Muslim women (like her) as passive, submissive and without agency. In her slams, she displays a strong social and political awareness by tackling topics of social justice – ranging from the suffering of the Syrian people during the country’s ongoing civil war to the complete apathy of the U.S government towards the Syrian humanitarian crisis (Kerkhoff 2016). In this study, my objective is to investigate the role of slam poetry particularly, and I am interested in the ways that slam is increasingly being re-appropriated by Arab (and especially Moroccan) women *artists* today to advocate for women’s rights and social justice, concomitantly.

## Methodology

As mentioned previously, (slam) poetry has long historical roots with political resistance and revolutionary tides in the Arab region. Because slam poetry is the modern equivalent of ancient poetry and has, therefore, become one of the favorite resistance genres for political activists across the region, especially for the youth, I chose to focus on slam as an artistic genre in this article. As I am originally from Morocco and that Morocco has witnessed a unique experience of the Arab Spring where the MV20F was quickly co-opted by the Moroccan regime (i.e. the King and the political elites) with the adoption of a reformed constitution in June 2011 that did not yield effective and sustainable social change (Boutkhil 2016; Daadaoui 2017), I chose to focus on Morocco as a country and on Noussayba Lahlou as an artist, who is currently one of the most famous female slam poets in Morocco. Noussayba is a 24-years-old Moroccan slam poet and doctoral student in French literature. For the past three years,

she traveled across the country to denounce rampant social inequalities in Morocco with her bittersweet slams written in French. She is best known for her famous slam “Identity Crisis,” which she performed in 2015, where she denounces widespread regime corruption in the country.

For the purposes of sharing and disseminating her slam poetry, Noussayba Lahlou is present across all social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. She currently has around three thousand followers on Instagram (Noussayba 2020a) and 835 subscribers on her YouTube channel (Noussayba 2020b). While she only has 14 followers on Twitter (Noussayba 2020c), her Facebook page (Noussayba 2020d) gathers over five thousand fans (i.e. subscriptions); she also has more than six thousand friends on her personal Facebook account. As Noussayba told me during her interview, social media and digital technologies have been particularly helpful for her to disseminate her slam poetry and acquire the notoriety she has today. She first publishes her poems on her social media platforms; these are then picked up by her fans and followers and shared again on their (own) private accounts:

My slams are first published on my YouTube channel, then on my Facebook page and sometimes I would share an excerpt on Instagram too. The people who follow me on social networks are generous in terms of sharing; they do not hesitate to share my content as soon as it is published and this encourages me enormously. All my published texts are accompanied by a video and sometimes with subtitles. These are necessary steps in creating the form and shape that I give to my “art.” Once the writing of a text is finished, I usually select an instrumental and then I record my slam. (Noussayba 2019)

However, Noussayba confided that whereas she has been particularly active across all social media platforms from 2015 to 2018, today, she is no longer as present on social media: “My current presence on social networks is almost non-existent, because of the period of personal transformation that I am going through at the moment. I am taking some time to reflect



on the future directions of my art” (Noussayba 2019). Noussayba has a modeling account as well (Creative Talent Evolution S.L. 2020), but, as she told me, this account is not linked to her activities as a slam poet: “I’ve always separated the two. The ‘modeling’ was a parenthesis that I used to make a living as a student” (Noussayba 2019). My methodology in this article is essentially qualitative. As feminist interviewing allows the researcher to gain a new and fresh perspective on the lives of respondents living in a particular community or society, I chose to conduct a (feminist) interview with the selected slam poet and activist Noussayba (Hesse-Biber 2013). In *Feminist Research Practice*, Nagy Hesse-Biber (2013) defines the practice of feminist interviewing as the retrieval of the subjugated knowledge of the diversity of women’s realities that often lie hidden and unarticulated, by focusing on issues of social change and social justice for women and other oppressed groups. As I am currently based in Canada and that Noussayba lives in Morocco, I decided to conduct an online interview whereby I administered, by email, an online questionnaire to the slam poet and activist who chose to receive and answer all my questions in English. The structured interview included questions such as: *What is the overall objective of your art? What does it talk about and which audience does it target primarily?; Why did you choose slam poetry specifically as an art genre? How is it appropriate to the message you aim to convey to your audience?; How does your art tackle the theme of social justice?*

In addition to conducting an online interview with the activist, I also did a content analysis of eight of Noussayba’s most recent slams written in French. These slams were selected with the help of the artist by paying attention to factors such as contemporaneity, relevance, and saliency (i.e. in terms of the most famous and the ones which convey the ideology of the artist the best). As Noussayba told me during our interview: “these selected texts represent my overall ideas and thoughts at the moment. They also represent me and my art the most” (Noussayba 2019). The selected slams were the following: “*Introduction*” (“Introduction”), “*Maladresse*” (“Clumsiness”), “*J’accuse*” (“I accuse”), “*Crise d’identité*” (“Identity Crisis”), “*Hiver Arabe*” (“Arab Winter”), “*Ces Gens-là*” (“Those People”), “*Reste en Fourmi*” (“Stay Brave”) and, finally, “*Ana Machi Mchicha*” (“I’m not a Cat”).

All these slams were produced between 2015 and 2019, a few years only following the events of the “Moroccan Spring” of 2011.

### Analysis findings

My analysis has revealed that Noussayba actively advocates for political resistance and social change through her art (i.e. slam poetry). Her slams are a direct call for political mobilization and a celebration of revolutionary figures and symbols, including herself. In her slam “*Crise d’identité*” (“Identity Crisis”), she particularly emphasizes this point: “*C’est pour ça qu’on va lutter / Je reste là et je ne vais pas quitter*” (“That’s why we’re going to fight / I’m going to stay here and I’m not going to leave”). She also advocates for social change by denouncing various forms of social injustice, including regime abuse and corruption. In the same slam, she underscores: “*C’est vrai que mes paroles ne sont pas pour plaire / C’est de l’art; il dérange... il est tout doucement révolutionnaire*” (“It’s true that my words are not here to please / It’s Art; it bothers... it is gently revolutionary”).

In fact, the content analysis of Noussayba’s eight most salient slams, including a cross reading of those poems, and my interview with the artist, have revealed major patterns in terms of the themes (and issues) that she is interested in and effectively addresses. Under the main theme of social justice, Noussayba’s poems tackle several subthemes such as the corruption and authoritarianism of the Moroccan political regime, the lack of societal awareness in the country, women’s rights, anti-imperialist and environmental concerns, and the rise of xenophobia and anti-immigrants’ sentiment in today’s world. As Noussayba told me in her interview: “My work celebrates tolerance, human values, love, gender equality, friendship, solitude and a lot more” (Noussayba 2019). In fact, in one of her most famous slams, “*Hiver Arabe*” (“Arab Winter”), the slam poet contrasts the violence, hatred, and animosity of the Moroccan political system with the peace, love, and compassion that her slams aim to convey: “*Je t’écrirai les battements du coeur que la haine oppresse / Je jetterai des cris d’amour parce que j’adore comment tu*

*stresses / Que tes larmes coulent sur ma peau sèche/Qu'ils cessent ces discours de bassesse dans ces oreilles de poétesse* ("I will write you the heartbeat that hatred oppresses / I'll shout love because I love how you stress / May your tears flow on my dry skin / Let them stop these speeches of meanness in these poetess' ears").

## Slamming the corrupt "poli-Dogs"

The major theme of Noussayba's slams is the corruption of the Moroccan political elite and the political system as a whole. There are clear references in her work to the corruption of the political dissidents whom she consistently describes as untrustworthy people who only pursue their personal interests. Her slam "*Introduction*" is particularly geared towards expressing her deep-seated distrust of the Moroccan politicians. She begins by addressing her audience and inviting them to beware of their manipulative rhetoric: "*Repose-toi du slam politique des politiciens et leur petitesse*" ("Rest from the political slam of politicians and their smallness"). Here, Noussayba's use of the idiom "political slam" refers to the politicians' (public) speeches and discourses. She underscores their "smallness," in terms of their content and intentionality, probably due to their lack of transparency and consistency. In fact, in "*Ces Gens-la*" ("Those People"), the slam poet denounces the politicians' ability, and even skillfulness, to deceive the people through their speeches by avoiding to address serious woes and issues. They focus, instead, on depicting a fake happy state of the affairs in order to escape criticism and keep the people under control, as she deplors: "*Et puis y a les gens bien / Comme la politique chez nous et quelques politi-Chiens / Ils embellissent les mots, ils ne prononcent pas le cancer / Ils embellissent les maux, et oui monsieur le commissaire!*" ("And then there are the good people / Like politics at home and some poli-"Dogs" / They embellish words, they don't pronounce the word 'cancer' / They embellish all evils, oh yes, Mr the Commissioner!"). In these verses, the word "cancer" refers to the social issues plaguing and devastating the country such as illiteracy, political abuse, and corruption, as well as rampant social inequalities that the woman activist tackles in her other slams.

In the same slam, Noussayba discusses of one the main techniques used by those “*Politi-Chiens*” (“poli-Dogs”) to fool the people, that is by making fake promises of social change during election times that will never be fulfilled afterward. She then denounces how their failure to meet social and political demands has led to an exacerbation of the already widespread social inequalities in the country between the all-rich and powerful and the most vulnerable: “Even after Hitler’s death, there are still Arians in our country / We give them everything, even if they don’t do anything / When they get sick they are reimbursed / And the people hold him tight, during the elections and then we push him away.” Here, Noussayba probably alludes to one critique that is consistently addressed to the Islamist *Justice and Development Party* – that of their failure to fulfill the main promise of their election campaign and agenda’s “top priority” of improving social (and economic) justice in post-Arab Spring Morocco. In “*Maladresse*” (“Clumsiness”), she uses the technique of contrast and comparison to better describe the utopian ideal those politicians should actually incarnate – that is an ideal of honesty, dedication, and benevolence towards the people, as she writes: “*Je te lirai des discours bien moins sinistres / Je me réveillerai en bonne heure, active au parlement / Je te jure amour et honnêteté loin de leur parler qui nous ment*” (“I’ll read you far less sinister speeches / I’ll wake up in a good hour, active in parliament / I swear love and honesty away from their talks that lie to us.”)

Therefore, in “*Introduction*,” Noussayba expresses her feelings of loss and confusion, that of a whole young generation who does not hold big hopes for the future because of the actual corruption of the people who are in power, which, in turn, creates a sense of despair and disillusion in the Moroccan youth; she deplors: “*Mais sais-tu comment est-il mon futur?*” (“But do you know what my future is like?”). In fact, during our interview, Noussayba explained the main reason why her slams are particularly geared towards a critique of the Moroccan political dissidents, as she told me: “Most people find that politics comes back a lot in my writing, and that’s because, I think, since our politicians represent and decide for us, I feel like I need to act and react with my poems, refusing to be fearful, shy or quiet in front of any kind of injustice, especially social ones”

(Noussayba 2019). In this testimonial, she underscores the political orientation of her slams, which finds its origins in the politicians' corruption and lack of accountability. For her, the politicians should be accountable to the people and as long as they will attempt to escape their social and political responsibility, her slams will continue to tackle and criticize them.

Subsequently in “*Introduction*,” the slam poet emphasizes she is angry not at the political dissidents alone but at an entire *system* of abuse and corruption, indignation that reflects in her writing which has now become “saturated” or *fed up*: “*Je te montre mon talent d’écriture / Bourré de faute et de quelques ratures / Apparemment il est devenu rageur de nature / Ton système moyenâgeux le sature*” (“I show you my writing [skills] / Stuffed with faults and a few scratches / Apparently it became angry by nature / Your medieval system *saturates* it.”) She characterizes this system as “medieval,” probably in terms of it being outdated and unfit for today’s world as well as abusive. The term “outdated” could also be a reference to the failure of the Moroccan Spring and the MV20F in successfully reforming the political system in 2011 where the people’s demands for effective social change were co-opted with the adoption of mere “cosmetic” constitutional reforms that, on the long run, only had the effect of maintaining, and even furthering, the status-quo under the newly elected Islamist government (Boutkhil 2016; Daadaoui 2017). Therefore, Noussayba seems to suggest that, subsequent to the wave of social and political consciousness that swept the country during the events of the “Moroccan Spring” back in 2011, the unreformed Moroccan political system (that, in addition, is now run by the Islamists) has become “outdated”).

Therefore, in the same slam, the activist also describes this (political) system as “*déboussolé*” or “disoriented,” probably due to its several malfunctions and contradictions. This realization has led her to take on her role as an activist in the society, which is to denounce a system that she perceives as a total “mess” and a “chaos”, as she slams: “Unfortunately I can only relay this mess here and all this chaos.” In her very famous slam “*Crise d’Identité*” (“Identity Crisis”), she further elaborates on what she means by

a *disoriented* system – that is a system filled with contradictions and devoid of logic, where principles and values are turned upside down, where the bad has become a transvestite for the good and vice versa; she explains:

When logic commits suicide in my country  
 When the rich come first and the poor have to pay  
 When the honest becomes a traitor and the truth remains denied  
 And instead of talking the law pushes us to scream [...]   
 A corrupt system that contradicts itself

Here, the choice of the word “disoriented” is also very subtle as it implies that the system can only be fixed by being turned upside down, which is a direct hint at the idea of the *toppling* (i.e. the revolution). In fact, at the end of “*Introduction*,” she invokes the political elite to either start working towards such an ideal or to leave (not only their positions but also) the country: “Leave the society and take the country with you.” However, in “*Maladresse*” (“Clumsiness”), Noussayba elucidates that she does not advocate for a radical revolution as we traditionally understand it: “*Je ne suis pas anti-système, je suis bien d'autres saletés / Car avant d'être anti un système, il faut d'abord être anti sa société*” (“I’m not anti-system; I’m much other dirt / Because before being anti system, you must first be anti-your-society”). Hence, the slam poet refuses the label of anti-system because that would mean she and her art stand against her society, which she argues is definitely not the case. She further elaborates on this idea in her slam “*Reste en Fourmi*” (“Stay Brave”): “*Le pays t’aime mais souvent le gouvernement est infidèle*” (“The country loves you but more than often the government is unfaithful”) – meaning that the government does not represent the overall society and that although it is undeniably corrupt, this does not justify the people turning against their own country. The above verses express a tough negotiation between the idea of being a revolutionary and yet remaining faithful and loyal to one’s homeland. In fact, Noussayba does not seem to advocate for a revolution in its traditional sense, that is a toppling of the system. She is rather in the favor of a slow but definite reform of the society, as well as a re-building of what she characterizes as a “disoriented” system towards a less corrupt,

more equitable, and just one. In this sense, Noussayba carries on exactly the same revolutionary spirit of the Moroccan Spring where activists of the 20MVF did not seek to topple King Mohamed VI's regime, but rather to implement a series of political *reforms* that aimed to restrict the King's powers, improve political transparency and the separation of powers (Ennaji 2016). In "*Maladresse*," the following two verses convey quite skillfully this idea of a more pragmatic, reformist, and sustainable kind of social change: "*Je serai la rebelle conformiste; Et nous vivrons ce rêve de démocrates réalistes*" ("I will be the conformist rebel; And we will live this dream of realist democrats"). Therefore, by continuing to advocate for unfulfilled political demands from the time of the Arab Spring in Morocco and adopting the same reformist (i.e. not radical) political stance of the 20MVF, Noussayba's bittersweet slams exemplify Badran's (2014; 2016) idea of the "continuing (gender) revolution" in post-Arab Spring North African states.

### Slamming your "disposable diplomas"

A secondary theme in Noussayba's slams is the corruption of the educational system which, in her sense, reflects the corruption of the politicians and the political system as a whole. First, in her slam "*Introduction*" where she conveys her distrust of the political dissidents in the country, she also describes most politicians as undeserving of their role and status because of their lack of educational qualification: "*Un foutur pour toi c'est ajoutable / Rien à faire de ton diplôme jetable / Un diplôme qui ne sait même pas se consoler*" ("A fool-tur for you is addable / Nothing to do with your disposable diploma / A degree that can't even console itself"). Describing their degrees as useless and "disposable," Noussayba underscores again the politicians' skill at fooling the people by being able to earn high positions in the government despite their low educational and cultural capitals. These verses could also speak to a wider problem of corruption within the educational system in Morocco today where some people resort to paying private schools or Universities to earn their degrees (Hamid 2018). Moreover, through the use of the phrases "*disposable*" (i.e. fake and throwable) and "can't even console itself," Noussayba seems to

suggest here it is not impossible some politicians have earned (i.e. bought) their degrees in the same way.

In “*Crise d’Identité*” (“Identity Crisis”), the slam poet further elaborates on the many flaws of the educational system in Morocco which she perceives as highly deficient and ineffective – like the politicians who run it; she deplores: “*L’éducation nationale a démissionné très tôt / Les gamins naissent avec leurs fardeaux*” (“The national education resigned very early / Kids are born with their burdens”). Here, Noussayba denounces the inefficiency of an educational system which creates many hurdles within the society; one of them is the phenomenon of social reproduction. Some children, especially those who belong to less privileged social backgrounds, are doomed not to receive a proper education nor to improve their (low) social status. As Badran (2016) points out that women’s creative disobedience in contemporary post-revolutionary North Africa states aims to protest the ongoing social inequalities in their societies, Noussayba’s slams do reveal patterns of women’s creative activism by tackling issues of social injustice in her country. Finally, in her slam “*Ces Gens-là*” (“Those People”), Noussayba also talks about the deficiencies of a capitalist system of education where students have to either get indebted to get an education today or to compete very harshly for lousy sums of government scholarships that are only granted to a meager minority, as she denounces: “*Et les étudiants qui se battent pour quelques Dirhams de la bourse*” (“Students are fighting for a few Dirhams... those of the scholarship”).

### Slamming the “human dream”

In fact, another secondary theme that Noussayba tackles in her bittersweet slams are the defects of the capitalist system and its devastating consequences not only on individual people and the society as a whole but also on Nature itself. In “*J’accuse*” (“I accuse”), Noussayba deplores: “*Le temps c’est l’argent, le capital, le pétrole*” (“Time is money, capital, oil”), thereby denouncing how life’s most precious gift (i.e. time and therefore life itself) has all become about material pursuits in today’s capitalist societies. The title of the slam itself “I accuse” is very revealing in the



sense that the slammer holds the neoliberal system responsible for several societal woes.

In “*Reste en Fourmi*” (“Stay Brave”), Noussayba deplores, for instance, the role of the neoliberal system in contributing to the rise of a materialist and individualist society that has furthered our social isolation and alienation: “*Une société qui consomme / Mais quels cons nous sommes / Un cocon et vivre seul*” (“A society that consumes, but what jerks we have become / A cocoon and live alone”). In “*Introduction*,” she denounces yet another evil product of the capitalist system which is the military-industrial complex that has turned us all into war machines and made us forget about love, solidarity, and companionship – including the artist herself: “*J’aurais aimé tiré sur imbéciles qui vendent des mitraillettes pour s’épanouir*” (“I would have liked to shoot idiots who sell machine guns to flourish”). In the following verse, Noussayba goes on: “But I’m just a little spoofer who doesn’t even know how to harm,” thereby emphasizing her refusal to resort to violence to end to violence despite being tempted to, as well as her powerlessness and helplessness in front of such a barbaric and vicious system. In fact, what the slam poet characterizes as the “disoriented system” discussed above finds its origins not only in the political elites who run it but also in the type of economic system that governs it; in “*Crise d’Identité*” (“Identity Crisis”), Noussayba provides an example of such a sense of *disorientation*: “*Et même si les Smartphone se vendent en vitrines et les livres par terre*” (“And even if today smartphones are sold on shop windows and books on the floor”). Such a blatant contradiction exemplifies one of the flaws of today’s capitalist system and underscores how the society has become “disoriented” by giving more worth and value to material possessions (even the most toxic and least productive ones) over immaterial ones (i.e. cultural, educational and spiritual).

In “*J’accuse*” (“I accuse”), Noussayba also links these critiques of the capitalist system to environmentalist concerns, in the sense that she perceives the consequences of the system on people and Nature are the same and emanate from the same origin: “*Nous ne connaissons pas une autre plaine pour nous réparer / Possessifs de nature, la terre nous nous en*

*sommes emparée*” (“We don’t know any other place where we can breathe / Possessive by nature, we have taken over the earth”). Here, Noussayba denounces the role of today’s (capitalist) system in alienating and destroying our nature, the only eco-system where we can live and thrive, which has furthered our sense of confusion and *disorientation*. Therefore, as an alternative to the capitalist society, the artist advocates for the “Human Dream,” probably in contradistinction with the American Dream that is at the origin of today’s neoliberal system. In “*J’accuse*” (“I accuse”) again, she claims: “*Je prône le humain dream, et il n’a pas besoin d’une boussole*” (“I advocate the human dream, and it doesn’t need a compass”). The use of the word compass is also strategic here as it could be a direct reference to the “disoriented” system she alludes to in her slam “*Introduction*.” To find one’s way in a disoriented space, one needs a compass. However, if we were to live in the Human (not the American) Dream, we will no longer live in a system full of contradictions where we constantly need a tool to *re-orient ourselves* and re-discover our (more humanist) nature.

### **Slamming against social backwardness**

Noussayba also links her attacks on the corrupt political system and the exploitative neoliberal economic system in Morocco to an overall problem of social awareness in the country. In this sense, she does not reject the entire blame on the politicians (and the system) but admits a part of the responsibility is also shared by the people themselves who are either inimical to social change or too fearful to stand up against corruption and injustice. In “*Crise d’Identité*” (“Identity Crisis”), she first tackles the problem of toxic and backward mentalities in the country which impede the society from evolving towards a more just and egalitarian one; she decries: “*Tout le monde se mêle de tout le monde même si c’est pas leur affaire*” (“Everyone meddles with everyone even if it’s not their business”). She then goes on to enumerate the flaws of what she perceives as a particularly passive and unproductive society: “Everyone wants change but no one is ready to change;” “We’re unemployed and often we don’t have anything to do;” “Our society is still a teenager / She doesn’t want to move just to receive gifts.” In this sense, Noussayba presents an intersectional

analysis where she posits that political corruption, economic exploitation and lack of social awareness contribute altogether to the reproduction of social injustice in present day Morocco.

Therefore, in “*Crise d’Identité*” (“Identity Crisis”), the slammer invokes the Moroccan people to become more mature and better aware of the situation in the country, as well as to stop living the fake picture that the politicians have depicted for them so skillfully: “*Une société enfantine [...] / Un peuple en enfer qui se croit au paradis / Qui croit qu’on a une vie pourtant ne vivons que sa parodie*” (“A childlike society [...] / A people in hell who think they’re in heaven / Who believes that we have a life yet live only his parody”). She also sends a call for the people to become more aware of systemic oppression, including the extent of corruption and social injustices plaguing her country, and therefore, to get a sense of dignity and freedom: “*Vivez librement, dignement ou au moins perdez la vie à essayer*” (“Live freely, with dignity or at least lose your life trying”). In this sense, Noussayba argues that change starts first at the individual level and that a societal change in people’s mentalities and attitudes is needed for Morocco to start evolving towards a more just social, political, and economic society. Hence, the slammer claims she will be the first to stand still in the face of corruption and social injustice, and that she refuses to leave until she sees the change she hopes for her country turn into a reality; her slams become her weapon through which she brings hope and resilience: “*Je reste là et je ne vais pas quitter*” (“Despite all this I’m staying here and I’m not going to leave”). As mentioned previously, because human dignity was the core theme of the Arab Spring, Noussayba’s slams are inscribed in a specific sociopolitical context that the aftermath of the revolutions where the artist-activist continues advocating for social justice. Finally, talking about her role as an individual in impacting wider social change, Noussayba also underscored this aspect during our interview:

I’ve always considered myself a superhero. Part of me knows I am not and might never be, but it’s like that sweet lie or little hope that keeps me going. It motivates me to go forward. It justifies my existence and role in this world, thinking that

I might, through my writing, make a change and push this world to become a better one. (Noussayba 2019)

## Slamming xenophobia and radical nationalism

Another social theme that Noussayba's slams aim to tackle and where change is required both at the individual and the institutional levels is the rise of xenophobia and anti-immigrants' sentiment in our day and age. The beginning of her slam "*J'accuse*" ("I accuse") is particularly full of references to the vocabulary of dreams (of travel), frontiers and foreignness whereby she introduces skillfully the theme of migration: "*Nous Sommes tous nés quelque part / Dans un coin du monde entouré des remparts / Et on veut partir on rêve d'un départ*" ("We're all born somewhere / In a corner of the world surrounded by ramparts / We want to leave and we dream of departure"). In the following verses, the rhetorical question: "*Peut-on vraiment se permettre de rêver?*" ("Can we really afford to dream?") introduces the difficulty of dreaming and therefore leaving and becoming a migrant in today's world. The contemporary (gradual) rise of xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment is best conveyed in the following verses: "*On ne peut pas toujours se permettre de rêver / De sourire aux étrangers, et accueillir des étrangetés*"; *Je ne suis qu'un immigré, je cause la migraine, bon gré, mal gré*" ("We can't always afford to dream / Smiling at strangers, and welcoming strangeness; "I'm just an immigrant, I cause migraine, willingly, unwillingly").

Then, Noussayba moves on to convey her feelings of anger in the face of this difficulty and even impossibility (of migrating), especially when she realizes the extent of racism and radical nationalism today: "*Mais être rejeté par un terrier pour une différence de nationalité? / Me met les nerfs / Ça m'énerve*" ("But to be rejected for a difference of nationality? / Gets on my nerves / It pisses me off"); "*On en a ras-le-bol d'attendre un visa pour mettre les pieds sur un sol*" ("We're fed up with waiting for a visa to set foot on a floor"). Subsequently, she underscores her indignation at one of the consequences of radical nationalism today – that is the rise of isolationism and the need to build frontiers between people, as she deplores: "Are there

public and private lands? / Once upon a time, a world became a small village and now it is on the pavement;” “Citizen of a torn world, divided into ten poles.” These verses also convey a sense of nostalgia for a time when there were no dividing lines between human beings, where all the people were just one (i.e. a village), and now this sense of unity is slowing falling apart, and with it the entire whole (i.e. on the pavement). The title of the slam “*Jaccuse*” (“I accuse”) is also revealing here in the sense that it addresses a direct critique to the governments that promote and/or adopt such anti-immigration policies. At last, she concludes by re-affirming her sense of being against all human divisions (on the basis of national origin, ethnicity or religion) and frontiers, and thereby re-invokes the need to bring back that lost sense of human solidarity and unity, which once made the world one, and still does for those who stand against racism and divisions:

Too bad the universe is in me I am neither Moroccan nor foreign  
Keep clinging to your little homeland and its colossal borders  
Because as long as there are human beings on earth  
You'll only have your only small country  
And we'll have the whole earth

### Slamming a feminist “cancer”

Noussayba’s poems also address the crucial theme of women’s rights which she tackles primarily in her slam “*Ana Machi Mchicha*” (“I am not a Cat”). She is concerned about the degree of corruption of the political system which also has negative consequences on the women’s condition in the country. Her main argument is that the Moroccan government (and the people) should be concerned with more fundamental issues in relation to women’s rights rather than merely superficial and ornamental ones. In “*Ces gens-la*” (“Those People”), she particularly underscores this idea by pointing out: “*Et les femmes on les défend juste quand il s’agit des jupes, des bisous et des blouses*” (“And women we only defend their rights when it comes to skirts, kisses, and blouses”). In fact, the slammer deplors how the Moroccan people and government are not concerned with crucial

issues when it comes to the women's condition in the country, such as the extent of domestic abuse and the low levels of female education and literacy. What Noussayba also denounces here is that when the government seems concerned with women's rights, it is, in fact, only a manifestation of "feminist pink-washing." This phenomenon designs a strategy of "state feminism" whereby the leaders of developing countries aim to boast gender equality and modernity on the surface to align with imperialist feminist agenda and attract Western funding while avoiding to tackle more serious issues in relation to women's rights that will have a more substantial impact on their societies. A prominent example of this phenomenon was former Libyan ruler Muammar Gaddafi's army of women bodyguards and fighters which he used to boast feminist commitments on the surface (i.e. gender equality) while, in reality, those women were captive sexual slaves in Gaddafi's palaces and victims of several forms of abuse (Rogers 2016).

In the same slam, Noussayba addresses a woman and informs her that she has a "cancer": "Good morning, ma'am! You have cancer, go outside / you can't have a life or a husband, our society is made for the strong." The word "cancer" could refer to the multiple social constraints that women have to deal with on a daily basis in Morocco and that Noussayba addresses particularly in her slam "*Ana Machi Mchicha*" ("I am not a Cat"): from the social pressures to get married ("Nice girls get married right way") and conform to the ideals of femininity ("Be sweet, beautiful, and take care of your face [...] A woman who gets angry is not beautiful to look at") to limited geographic (and intellectual) mobility ("Don't come home late / Do not change your mind often / [...] Do not get mixed up with thoughts... shopping will make you feel better"), and limited divorce rights ("Never a divorce, don't be crazy and learn to bear"), these social constraints have become a sort of burden (i.e. "cancer") on Moroccan women to bear. This idea is further reinforced through her argument that the "society is only made for the strong," that is the men and the government; in the same slam, she points out the extent of sexual harassment in Morocco: "Street, work, hospital café / Don't think too much, you're still prey to the male," thereby denouncing the impact of those social woes and injustices against women which have resulted in giving them "cancer." Her earlier invocation for

women to “go outside” aims to emphasize that they do not have their place in such a society where they are constantly discouraged from claiming their place in the public sphere, a space that belongs to men only. Subsequently, Noussayba denounces the unachievable beauty ideals and standards and their devastating effects on the bodies (and lives) of Moroccan women: “We can’t take a picture of you, you’re going to break the décor you’re pale, without hair / You don’t even have a beautiful body;” “Why do you want to know how much I weigh / you see we can’t all be J-Lopez / [...] I can do better than a model who walks off”). Therefore, by denouncing the effects of the beauty industry on women, the slam poet tackles a serious feminist issue, thereby distinguishing her committed art from the government’s pink-washed concerns and invokes her (male) audience to start considering and treating women as fully-fledged beings and their equal: “Behind every woman, there is her experience, her thoughts, and herself.”

Finally, during our interview, Noussayba underscored how slam poetry was an appropriate medium for her to work around those social pressures, including the necessity of conforming to one’s gender role, in order to express herself freely in public:

Considering the environment and the society I was brought up in, where rap is still largely perceived as a man-dominated domain, and due to the social pressures I was subjected to for thinking about rapping in public, slam poetry was an alternative medium I could use to express myself. Self and peer censorship, along with the traditional gender roles, had drawn me to find a “suitable” art form for my gender. (Noussayba 2019)

## Slamming the Moroccan Winter

Finally, Noussayba’s slams also aim to protest against the extent of despotic rule and authoritarianism in the Arab region by taking Morocco as a case study and its devastating consequences on the people and the society. As mentioned previously, her slam “*Hiver Arabe*” (“Arab

Winter”) is a direct reference to the events of the Arab Spring of 2011, a series of uprisings which aimed to overthrow authoritarian regimes across the Arab region through both violent and non-violent protests. The artist uses the metaphor of the “Winter” to underscore the failure of these uprisings in positively affecting social change in the country, an aspect that will be discussed later in this section.

In this slam, the activist first compares the despotic Arab rulers to Gods: “*Nos dieux ne se cachent pas derrière les nuages mais dans des grottes*” (“Our Gods do not hide behind the clouds but in caves”), that is probably in reference to the former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein who was found hiding in a hut in Iraq in 2003 when he was on the run before being sentenced to death, and the rumors around former Al Qaeda leader Ben-Laden being found in a cave in Pakistan before he was shot in 2011 (Foster 2018; Ross 2011). In another verse, she also highlights the greed, malice and opportunism of these Arab God-like Kings: “The walls have ears and your Gods have a big belly.” Hence, the metaphor of Kings incarnating Gods also alludes to them acting all-powerful and exploitative as if they are above all human and mundane laws.

In “*Hiver Arabe*” (“Arab Winter”), Noussayba particularly compares the Moroccan King Mohamed VI, who also holds the title of *Emir el Muminin* (i.e. the Prince of the Faithful), to God and talks about her newfound “heresy”, which she refers to repeatedly in her slam: “*Je suis devenue infidèle, oui et je le crierai sur les toits*” (“I’ve become unfaithful, yes, and I’ll shout it from the rooftops”); “*Hérétique je ne suivrai plus votre troupeau*” (“Heretic I will no longer follow your flock”); “*Je suis un être désormais sans religion*” (“I am now a being without religion”). This allegory of the heresy actually alludes to her switching from a loyal follower of the regime to a fierce opponent (and, perhaps, even a revolutionary) due to her refusal to recognize its leader as legitimate. However, this shift does not come for the slammer without the realization of the danger it entails for her life, thereby further underscoring the regime’s despotism due to its hostility towards all forms of opposition and contestation: “*Seigneur je vous annonce que j’arrête la prière / Et je sais qu’après cette amorce j’irai tout*



*droit au cimetière*” (“Lord I announce to you that I renounce the prayer / And I know that after this confession I will go straight to the cemetery”); *“J’ai choisi le clan des infidèles même s’il y en a que très peu / Et pas la peine de me dire qu’en parler fait mourir*” (“I chose the clan of infidels even if there are very few / And you don’t have to tell me that talking about it makes you die”). By emphasizing the fact that there are only a few infidels in the country, Noussayba seems to suggest there are a few people who dare to revolt against the system or express their opposition – for they are either too afraid for their lives or corrupt themselves. Then, the activist officially declares herself a stateless person after her newfound “heresy”: “Take this nationality card and never give it back to me / This little piece of paper does not identify me!”

Subsequently, Noussayba moves on to elucidate the motives behind her becoming a stateless activist that is, first, her deep-seated distrust of the leader of the system: “Goodbye to the God you are, your power stops when the people are suspicious” as well as the hatred that it has instilled in her: “Nothing comes out of nothing and I have reasons for my hatred / [...] What nation are you talking about, I feel hatred for all that I loved.” In fact, in *“Maladresse”* (“Clumsiness”), the slam poet explains that the main reason behind her becoming an activist is her “suffering,” a feeling that finds its origins in the many injustices of the political system which instills distrust and animosity in the people, including her: *“La souffrance a fait de moi une activiste sur la piste”* (“The suffering made me an activist on the trail”). Such suffering is also caused by a system that abuses and brutalizes its people; in *“Hiver Arabe”* (“Arab Winter”) she explains: “You don’t even back down to give us room / While we used to fight to keep you out of the way / Perched on thrones made up of human corpses.” In *“Crise d’Identité”* (“Identity Crisis”), she deplors how this suffering is due not only to the physical violence but also to the mental and moral violence (i.e. the deception, the humiliation) that the Moroccan system inflicts upon its people: *“Vivons dans la déception, des décès par million, et on t’apprend en t’humiliant”* (“Let’s live in disappointment, deaths by a million, and they teach you by humiliating you”).

Therefore, Noussayba underscores that such forms of abuse and humiliation can only produce revolutionary spirits like hers; in this sense, the revolution becomes a fatality in the face of oppression and despotism: “*Celui qui sème la dictature récoltera un jour des braves / Il récoltera la rage, la révolution mais jamais des esclaves*” (“Whoever sows dictatorship will one day reap from the brave / He will reap rage and revolution but never slaves”). Hence, Noussayba’s newfound “heresy” in “Arab Winter,” that is a direct reference to the events of the Arab Spring, finds its origins in the many forms of social abuses and injustices she was a witness to in her country and which made it impossible for her to give allegiance to the system any longer – like the thousands of Moroccans who slid to “heresy” by expressing publicly their opposition to the regime and demanded a thorough reform of the political system, during a series of demonstrations that marked the Moroccan Spring from February to June 2011 (Abadi 2014).

However, in one of the final verses, Noussayba points out that the Arab Spring has actually turned to be a Winter: “*Je te signale que c’est un hiver Arabe*” (“And I’d like to point out that it’s an Arab winter”). In fact, in the aftermath of the series of revolutions, a blatant backlash against human and women’s rights was evident in most North African post-revolutionary states with the rise of political instability and political Islam to power and the counterrevolution against women’s constitutional rights (Sadiqi 2016). For instance, the “Moroccan Spring” was marked by the rise of political Islam (the PJD) to power for the first time in the history of the country in November 2011. This must be the reason behind Noussayba’s use of the metaphor of the “Winter,” instead of the “Spring.” In Morocco particularly, the February 20 Movement (MV20F) for freedom and individual liberties was quickly co-opted by the Moroccan regime. The adoption of a new constitution in June 2011 that allegedly restricted many of the King’s political prerogatives, by strengthening the role of the prime minister and a newly elected legislature, and reaffirmed the social rights of other marginalized social groups, such as women and the Native peoples of Morocco – the Berber or Amazighs – allowed to alleviate some of the people’s demands without effectively institutionalizing

equality between the sexes or effecting concrete social change in people's everyday lives (Boutkhil 2016; Daadaoui 2017; Ennaji 2016). This power of the King (and the political system) to co-opt an entire revolution is best conveyed in Noussayba's two subsequent verses: "*Mais depuis quand t'as le pouvoir sur les saisons*" ("But since you have the power over the seasons" that is to make a Spring a winter and vice versa), and: "*Celui qui est destiné à tomber, bizarrement un jour se relève*" ("Whoever is destined to fall, strangely one day rises"), that is in reference to the Moroccan King and his political regime still holding steady and unreformed despite the local revolutionary movement of the MV20F. Therefore, Noussayba's slam "Arab Winter" advocates the necessity for the revolution to be carried on exactly because it was co-opted and hijacked by the regime and, therefore, never had the chance to impact the Moroccan society in a significant and meaningful way. In some aspects, it even materialized as a backlash against previously secured social and political rights. In fact, during our interview, Noussayba underscored that the two oxymorons she used in her slam "Clumsiness" ("I will be the conformist rebel" and "We will live this dream of realist democrats") also speak to her (and the Moroccan people's) surrender and resignation subsequent to their crushed dreams of revolution and reform from the time of the Arab Spring (Noussayba 2019). In this sense, her slams advocate that the revolution needs to *continue* until social and political liberties are effectively affected and implemented in the Moroccan society, not merely cosmetically or in the state constitution only, thereby reflecting Badran's (2014; 2016) idea of the continuing (cultural and gender) revolution in the North African region today. While her bittersweet slams appear to be quite bold and daring, Noussayba told me during our interview: "I have never had any reaction from the government" (Noussayba 2019). Therefore, it seems the Moroccan government never reacted to Noussayba's revolutionary slams, probably to avoid any negative reactions against the establishment, whether nationally or internationally, including from the Moroccan artist and activist community, and, thereby, to avoid stirring a national controversy. But perhaps more importantly, the government did not wish to give Noussayba (and her revolutionary slams) any recognition or credits of any sort.

## Conclusion

My analysis of Noussayba's slam poetry and my interview with her have revealed that her slam aims to deplore systemic oppression and several forms of social injustice that continue to plague contemporary (i.e. post-Arab Spring) Morocco. Her revolutionary verses promote such diverse principles and ideals as gender equality, environmentalist awareness, education for all, political transparency, democratic commitment, and other humanist values. This confirms Wahba's (2016) initial argument in relation to women's activism in the context of the Arab Spring where their involvement in the series of uprisings did not only aim at the removal of the ruler but of all forms of oppression, from political corruption to economic exploitation and lack of societal awareness. Such a form of activism where women activists aim to advocate for gender equality and social justice concomitantly has also been carried beyond the revolutions of the Arab Spring to the present context through creative disobedience patterns. In fact, Badran (2016) points out that women's creative disobedience in contemporary post-revolutionary North African states aims to protest the ongoing gender and social inequalities in their societies that have persisted until the present day despite the so-called progressive movements of the Arab Spring. In this sense, Noussayba's slams are an effective expression of women's creative disobedience in Post-Arab Spring North Africa where women activists are increasingly resorting to art as a revolutionary tool to continue advocating for unfulfilled demands from a decade ago.

Noussayba's slam "Arab Winter" is even a direct reference to the events of the Arab Spring. By focusing on the negative outcomes of the Arab uprisings, her objective is to *continue* advocating for social justice in the aftermath of the "Moroccan Spring" which was characterized by the hijacking of the local revolutionary movement (MV20F) by the Moroccan regime with the adoption of a "reformed" constitution in June 2011, the rise of political Islam (the PJD) to power in November 2011 and their rejection of the previous government's *Agenda for Equality 2011-2015*, and a blatant backlash against women's rights in the ensuing period. This also confirms Badran's (2014; 2016) idea of the *continuing (gender) revolution*

in the North African region today which manifests itself, among others, in women's creative disobedience patterns and art activism. In this sense, Noussayba's political slam and revolutionary verses are inscribed in a specific sociopolitical context that is the aftermath of the Arab Spring where the activist is carrying on the same reformist revolutionary spirit of the 20MVF to advocate, not for a mere toppling of the system, but for genuine social, political and economic reforms through her progressive ideals. In fact, as pointed out in the analysis section, Noussayba's writings do not advocate for a radical political revolution per se, but rather, for a gradual revolution and a revolution of the minds and spirits towards a more just and egalitarian society, a sort of more sustainable change that can be carried on beyond the time of the revolutions.

Finally, during our interview, Noussayba told me that the audience's reaction to her slams is generally positive, welcoming, and even enthusiastic. For instance, the music video of her slam "*Reste en Fourmi*" ("Stay Brave"), which was viewed over seven thousand times, received over three hundred and thirty likes on her YouTube channel for only two disliked; she continued: "There have been some negative reactions sometimes but these were rare; this is a truth that cannot be denied but also one of the reasons that drives me to keep moving forward today" (Noussayba 2019). Likewise, the Moroccan civil society also seems to be very enthusiastic about Noussayba's slam poetry; during a recent fieldwork I conducted in Morocco with several *artists* and cultural actors in the artistic scene, a few representatives from *l'Atelier de l'Observatoire*, a local NGO specialized in art and research to develop socially participative projects by bringing artists, students, researchers, and residents together, told me that they have been thrilled to work with Noussayba Lahlou on a recent project where she was officially invited to write and perform a slam in the Moroccan dialect of Darija. The objective of the project was to bring slam poetry in working-class neighborhoods of the economic capital (Casablanca) in order to raise the marginalized youth's awareness about social justice issues and trigger meaningful debates. As for the Moroccan government, as mentioned earlier, Noussayba never received any reaction. They were no encouraging comments nor threats, attempts

of intimidation or legal pursuits. Therefore, for the establishment, it is as if her slams do not exist – or else only exist in a sort of “buffer zone” where she is given no recognition. Last but not least, Noussayba insisted on underscoring the open invitation for peace, freedom, and equality that her slam poetry constitutes for all peoples, regardless of national origin, ethnicity, or religious background:

My poems address different topics such as: politics, social problems, gender equality, humanity in general... which I think are topics that are of interest not only to adults but also to teenagers. So, when I write and publish, I don't choose an audience... but the audience, instead, chooses my poems. (Noussayba 2019)

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# The Rise of Fourth-Wave Feminism in the Arab region? *Cyberfeminism and Women's Activism at the Crossroads of the Arab Spring*

Maha Tazi and Kenza Oumlil

Concordia University  
Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane

## Abstract:

*This article explores the emergence of fourth-wave feminism in the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region in the context of the Arab Spring, which was a series of uprisings that followed the self-immolation of Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi in December 2010 and spread through several countries in the MENA region. The uprisings protested authoritarian regimes and called for democracy, freedom, and social justice. Fourth-wave feminism finds its origins in the new Web 2.0 technologies which give users the power to shape their own content, and is characterized by a mass of tech-savvy and young feminists who harness the power of the Internet and the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to advocate for social justice and gender equality (Baumgardner 2011; Licudine 2015; Martin and Valentin 2013). Despite the enduring digital gap in the MENA region, feminists contributed significantly in the context of the Arab Spring to the public debates and discussions online to call for mass mobilization as well as raise awareness about gender issues and discrimination.*

*Taking as objects of analysis three case studies of feminist interventions from Egypt, Tunisia, and Lebanon, the article examines the ways in which the selected activists in the region respond to their contemporary context by advocating for gender equality at the same time that they seek to promote a wider social justice agenda for their respective countries. The case studies were selected on the basis of the artists self-identifying as feminists who attempt to harness the power of ICTs to end authoritarian rule and promote human rights, with specific attention to achieving societal gender equality. In addition, the selected case studies are particularly relevant because their online platforms received significant media coverage and also benefit from a significant online following and fan-base (ranging from 2,400 fans to 12,660 followers for the Facebook pages). The analysis is based on conducted structured*

*interviews with the three feminist activists, and is complemented with a textual analysis of their own online platforms, which include a feminist blog and Facebook pages, as well as relevant contextual information found in the public domain.*

### Keywords:

*Arab Spring; Authoritarianism; Cyberfeminism; Fourth-Wave Feminism; Gender Equality; Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs); Middle East and North Africa; Social Justice.*

## Introduction

Both before and during the Arab Spring uprisings, women in the Arab region expressed their agency through several online activist initiatives such as the #women2drive campaign in Saudi Arabia, and the more recent hashtag and petition #RIPAmina in Morocco following the suicide of a young teenager who was forced to marry her rapist, leading to the abolition of the repressive law in the country. Hashtags have indeed played a predominant role in giving women's movements a new impetus, allowing feminist activists to acquire more visibility and draw greater support to their cause. More recently, a series of uprisings which aimed to overthrow despotic regimes across the Arab region and lead to the rise of a transnational activist movement, marked a historical turn and the start of a new chapter for Arab women's activism. In December 2010, the self-burning of Mohamed Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid officially marked the start of the Tunisian revolution and the beginning of the Arab Spring, which was marked by a series of uprisings that sparked across the Middle East and North Africa. Arab Spring social movements contested several autocratic regimes through both violent and non-violent protests, coups, and demonstrations. It is impossible to understand the rise of fourth-wave feminism in the Arab region without paying close attention, first, to the favorable conditions that were permeated by the unique technological and geopolitical context that constituted the Arab Spring. A more inclusive and humanist version of feminism that draws on third-wave (i.e. intersectional) feminist concerns, fourth-wave feminism has spread rapidly with the advent of the Internet and the ICTs that give

women users the power to shape their own content by posting it online in order to advocate gender equality and social justice (Licudine 2015; Martin and Valentin 2013; Munro 2013).

Therefore, in this article, we examine how the Arab Spring provided the quintessential technopolitical conditions for the rise of fourth-wave feminism in the MENA region. Given that the literature on the different waves of the feminist movement tends to base its assumptions on a European and North American context, we provide in this article a more “inclusive” overview of the literature on the different waves of the feminist movement, and trace the genealogy of feminist activism in both Western and Arab contexts. In the following section, we situate Arab women’s agency in relation to the role of new media technologies. Subsequently, we analyze the role that the Internet plays in the rise of fourth-wave feminism in the region, and the important characteristic of transnationalism. We then identify some regional specificities and examine the women activists’ integration of human rights and social justice concerns. Finally, we identify the humanist stance of this new wave and discuss obstacles facing cyberfeminists today in the region. This article suggests that online activism was effective as it resulted in greater empowerment of women across the region to claim equal access to the public sphere, where online activism was efficiently translated into offline political and social engagement.

## Genealogy of Feminist Movements

The typical genealogy locates the historical birth of the feminist movement in the West, and particularly in the U.S. and the United Kingdom, in the late 1880s as a movement to establish equal political, economic, cultural, personal, and social rights for women (Hawkesworth 2006). Feminism subsequently evolved through several phases. First-wave feminism, also known as the “suffragettes’ movement,” lasted throughout the first half of the 20th century and aimed to achieve voting and political representation rights for women (Baumgardner 2011; Munro 2013).

During this period, Arab and Muslim women played an active role in their countries' accession to independence during the long years of resistance against colonial rule in the late 19th century. They were actively involved in their countries nationalist struggles against imperialism and colonialism in the region through such prominent figures as Huda Sha'rawi, the then President of the *Egyptian Feminist Union*, and Malika El-Fassi in Morocco, who advocated both for women's educational rights and national independence (cooke 2016; Ennaji 2016).

Second-wave feminism was born in the 1960s out of a growing sense of social injustice in the context of the U.S. anti-Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement to tackle all aspects of discrimination against women, including socio-economic concerns, in order to achieve equal access to the public sphere (Baumgardner 2011; Rampton 2015). At the same time, during this second-wave, Arab and Muslim women were actively involved as members of various feminist associations and organizations to denounce their unfair social and political exclusion from the public sphere in recently independent Arab states. In the post-independence era, despite their active contributions to nationalist struggles throughout the region, women were denied political participation and representation rights, and were (re) ostracized in the private-domestic sphere to fulfill their "God-given" family and reproductive roles (Sadiqi 2016). Since then, feminists in the region have struggled to improve their legal rights and to raise cultural awareness about gender discrimination through several feminist organizations, and to advocate gender sensitive reforms of highly conservative Family Codes such as the Moroccan Personal Status Code (Hamza 2016; Sadiqi 2016).

A third-wave, beginning in the 1990s, criticized earlier movements for treating all women as a homogenous group, introducing notions of privilege checking, intersectionality (Mohanty 1991)<sup>1</sup>, post-colonialism and critical race theory (Crenshaw 1991; Walker 1995), sex-positive feminism (Snyder 2008)<sup>2</sup>, and queer theory (Mann and Huffman 2005)<sup>3</sup>. During this period, Arabo-Muslim postcolonial feminist have actively drawn from theories of intersectionality to denounce the narrative of powerlessness and submissiveness that is usually ascribed to Arab and Muslim women

because of their double-minority status: as members of the racialized Arab minority vis-à-vis the white dominant majority and as the female minority of a male-dominated (Arab) community (Abu Lughod 2002). Against this dominant and demeaning narrative, Arab and Muslim third-wave feminists have underscored not only their indisputable agency but also their context-sensitive and cultural specific project of emancipation through effective tactics of negotiation with various regimes of power, from international organizations to state institutions and local NGOs (Moghadam 2010; Mookherjee 2005).

Cyberfeminism has emerged as one of the largest innovations in feminism in the last 50 years that harnesses the power of online media platforms to discuss, uplift, and activate gender equality and social justice (Martin and Valentin 2013). In fact, the genealogy typically traces the emergence of fourth-wave feminism to 2008 (Munro 2013). Several authors argue that we are witnessing the rise of a new (fourth) wave of the feminist movement with the advent of cyberfeminism, the Internet and the ICTs, which are becoming increasingly effective tools to denounce misogyny and social injustices against women (Baumgardner 2011; Carrier 2015; Munro 2013). Fourth-wave feminism finds its origins in the technology brought about by Web 2.0 which gives users the power to shape their own content (Licudine 2015). A new generation of “tech savvy”, “gender-sophisticated” women, and “a mass of younger feminists” are harnessing the power of the Internet and social media to challenge gender inequity and advocate socio-economic and political concerns concomitantly (Baumgardner 2011; Cochrane 2013; Maclaran 2015; Schuster 2013). Cyberfeminism has given feminist activism a new momentum by instigating a mass movement where social media and the Internet act as equalizers between people of various ethnic, religious, and ideological backgrounds (Carrier 2015; Licudine 2015). It has, therefore, led to the development of transnational solidarities between feminists worldwide, and allowed women’s rights activists to fight on several fronts today, by incorporating aspects of human rights, the feminization of poverty, good governance, and social justice to their initial struggle for gender equality (Cochrane 2013; Martin and Valentin 2013; Maclaran 2015).



In light of the recent Arab uprisings and the series of devastating events which have been shaking the region for the past decade, Arab women activists are also increasingly mobilizing around new technologies, more specifically the Internet and social media, as crucial tools to press for peace and conflict resolution in the region and to advocate for women's rights (Al Rawi 2014; Gheytauchi and Moghadam 2014; Hosni 2017). However, it is clear from the genealogy discussed above that Arab women's activism did not start with the digital revolution.

### Role of New Media Technologies

Two conflicting and opposing views on the role of new media technologies are prevalent in contemporary societies. On the one hand, techno-utopian authors argue that access to ICTs contributes to enhanced civil society and deliberative democracy (Hague and Loader 1999). In *The Rise of the Network Society*, Manuel Castells (2010) posits that the decentralized structures and decision-making patterns that characterize "the network society" have an overall empowering effect because of the increase in social exchange and interactivity (2010, 385). In a similar vein, Larry Diamond (2010) coined the term liberation technology to underscore the power of the ICTs for social activists living under authoritarian regimes.

On the other hand, a more pessimistic view calls attention to the reality that the same *liberation technology* can also be used by authoritarian states to exert pressures on social activists, through either censorship or repression (Barber 1996; Fox 1994), as well as to collect private information on individuals to be manufactured by governments and multinational corporations (Schneier 2000). For instance, Rebecca McKinnon advances the term *networked authoritarianism* to denounce the Chinese government's effective use of ICTs to censor and suppress dissent (2010, 2). As a consequence, a more moderate view advanced by Deibert and Rohozinski in "Liberation vs. Control: The Future of Cyberspace," criticizes the classical dichotomy and reductionist polarization between the either liberating or repressing role of the ICTs in today's societies, and instead, they argue that: "cyberspace is

a domain of intense competition, one that creates an ever-changing matrix of opportunities and constraints for social forces and ideas” (2010, 45). This “ever-changing matrix of opportunities” is not dissimilar from the Arab region<sup>4</sup> where activists used new media technologies for emancipatory purposes during the Arab Spring. However, authoritarian Arab regimes instrumentalized them to exert censorship on activists’ platforms (Morozov 2011; Tucker 2012).

Rather than viewing cyberspace as a unidirectional environment, we locate it as a complex and dynamic domain which affords ordinary users opportunities to generate content but also limits their potential due to the surveillance and loss of privacy inflicted on them by government and large corporations.

### New Media Technologies and Arab Women’s Agency

For Arab women, the dominant narrative of their powerlessness has been challenged by their active presence online, but also before that by other women on the ground who sought to improve their conditions through activist engagement. Scholars have denounced the narrative of powerlessness and victimization that is usually ascribed to Middle Eastern women (Moghadam 2010), perpetuating the stereotypes of Muslim women as helpless victims in need of Western liberation (Abu-Lughod 2002). Feminist analyses which challenge the dominant narrative of the victimhood, submissiveness, and powerlessness of Arab and Muslim women serve, therefore, as crucial points of reference for this research (Abu-Lughod 2002; Ayotte and Husain 2005; Butler 2004; Jiwani 2006; Khan 1998; Macdonald 2006; Nayak 2006; Oumlil 2010; Parameswaran 2006; Razack 2008; Vivian 1999; Todd 1998; Yeğenoğlu 1998). In this sense, we argue that agency is distributive and contingent on social location and contextual factors (Pienaar and Dilkes-Frane 2017).

In more recent events, women have actively contributed to challenging to authoritarian regimes throughout the region in the context

of the *Arab Spring*. As Moghadam (2010) and Khamis (2011) suggest, the advent of the Internet has significantly impacted the feminist movement in the Arab region in recent years, where “Arab women’s prolific online activities have contributed a new chapter to the history of both Arab feminism and the region” (2011, 748). These two studies therefore mention the potential of using digital technologies as cyberfeminism in the region.

In fact, in the context of the Arab Spring, digital media provided the necessary tools for social movements to fulfill political goals that were unachievable before (Howard and Hussain 2013, 18), and have granted women “unprecedented visibility” (Bernard, Bessis and Cherif 2012, 3). Digital technologies played a significant role in the context of the Arab Spring in enabling ordinary people and social activists to establish communication networks and overturn authoritarian regimes (Hosni 2017). In societies where states closely control and monitor the mass media, ICTs play a critical role to circumvent state censorship and repression. Across the region, activist groups have been using new technologies to create “pressure from below” to destabilize the traditional hierarchies of power (Al Rawi 2014, 1149). Digital technologies have also created alternative platforms for dissenting and opposing voices, where the free flow of information becomes a source of power that enables “political contests to take place over the aspirations, values, and imaginations of people” (Gheytanchi and Moghadam 2014, 4), in spite of the persistent digital gap throughout the region.

In fact, the plague of the digital divide in the Arab region continues to undermine equal access (and, therefore, empowering potential) of the Internet for all. In communication studies, the digital divide refers to the gap between those who have access to computers and digital technologies, and those who do not. And here, access does not only include the ability to have a computer, digital technology, and Internet connection, but also to possess the digital skills and know-how to operate these technologies (van Dijk and Hacker 2003). Benni et al. (2016) examined the degree of digitization across nine Arab

countries (Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) and found that only 50 percent of households have access to the Internet, and only 61 percent of individuals are regular Internet users.

## Methodology

To explore the development of cyberfeminism, the authors relied on a series of structured interviews conducted from 2015–17 with three feminist activists, who fall into the age range of 21 to 34 years old, and who have created their own online platforms. The selected three female activists are Tunisian, Egyptian, and Lebanese and self-identify as *feminists*. These case studies were selected because they were feminist interventions involved in the Arab Spring democratization project. In addition, they received significant media coverage and attention (e.g.: Errazouki 2012; “*Farah, The Egyptian Feminist*” 2013; JC 2015), and have benefited from a significant online following and fan-base (ranging from 2,400 fans to 12,660 followers for the Facebook pages).

The interview questions were administered by email in the form of a questionnaire including open-ended questions to gain further understanding about the selected feminist activists’ motivations for creating and maintaining their blogs and Facebook pages. The interviewees were also asked about their overall objectives, targeted audiences, levels of interactivity with their audiences, and topics of interest.

The interviews were supplemented with rigorous textual analysis of the activists’ online posts, including the descriptive (or “About”) sections of each platform, articles posted, and other audiovisual materials in order to identify the activists’ topics of interests, ideological motivations, and objectives for their platform.

The first case study is *A Tunisian Girl*, a trilingual blog (French, Arabic, and English) by Tunisian activist Lina Ben Mhenni’s that went viral and served as a major informational source during the 2011 Tunisian

demonstrations. Protests were recorded live on cell phone cameras and uploaded onto the blog. In post-revolutionary Tunisia, the young Tunisian activist launched her “Books to Prisons” campaign for political prisoners who would go on hunger strikes to claim their right to read in Tunisian prisons. Ben Mhenni unexpectedly died of Lupus recently (January 2020) at the young age of 36. Images of women carrying her coffin broke with cultural norms as women typically stay at home and do not attend funeral processions, thereby mirroring the spirit of Ben Mhenni’s activism and her commitment to freedom and women’s right to access the public sphere.

The second case study is *Egyptian Feminist*, a Facebook page created in 2013 by twenty-one-year-old Egyptian activist. This interviewee requested that her identity would be kept confidential and to be referred to anonymously in this article as *Egyptian Feminist* – the name of her Facebook page. In the “About” section of the page, *Egyptian Feminist* clearly identifies herself as a feminist: “I am a feminist – someone who believes in social, political, and economic equality between women and men. This page is dedicated to fighting misogyny and sexual discrimination.” The page currently has 2,416 fans. In an interview published on the *Sweden and the Middle East Views* website, *Egyptian Feminist* speaks about the role models who have inspired her project; she mentions Xena Amro, founder of *True Lebanese Feminist*.

The third case study is *True Lebanese Feminist*, a Facebook page started in 2012 by twenty-two-year-old Lebanese college student Xena Amro. In an interview published on the *Sweden and the Middle East Views* website Xena (JC 2013) said: “The purpose of the page is to raise awareness about women’s issues not just in Lebanon, but also globally. There are too many stereotypes placed on women that I want to fight against.” Despite the harassments in school and on the Facebook page, which was reported and blocked several times, Xena says she was determined to keep her page and to further expand it. *True Lebanese Feminist* has nearly 12,684 followers today. Xena can be considered a pioneer of fourth-wave feminism in the region because her page served as an inspiration for other young feminists in the region who created their

own platforms or engaged more purposefully in debates about women's rights (Amro 2015).

## Analysis

### The Internet as a Tool to Raise Feminist Awareness

The analysis revealed that the increasing Internet penetration and digital presence in the Arab region has led to a shift in feminist organizing. Mobilizing online platforms, fourth-wave feminists express their views and push for change in new mediated forms. In fact, the selected feminist activists have used the Internet as a tool to raise awareness about social injustices that affect women in their daily lives and to mobilize other women to join the struggle. These concerns and means of activism represent essential characteristics of fourth-wave feminism (Baumgardner 2011; Martin and Valentin 2013; Munro 2013).

As a tool, the Internet presents several advantages: first, effective online activism is only possible because the Internet offers anonymity, accessibility, low-cost, and flexibility. In her interview, the founder of the *Egyptian Feminist* Facebook page stressed the advantages of accessibility and anonymity associated with the use of the Internet: "First of all, on the internet, it is so easy to reach a lot of people. Second of all and most importantly, you can be anonymous, choose a pseudonym if you're not feeling safe, and you're good" (*Egyptian Feminist* 2015). Capitalizing on these multiple affordances, fourth-wave feminists in the West have used the Internet to create a "call-out" culture which challenges sexism (Munro 2013, 1). In a similar vein, when interviewed, *Egyptian Feminist* (2015) also commented that: "The Internet, in my opinion, is a great tool for women who feel oppressed and want to express their opinions and fight for their rights."

Baumgardner (2011) and Schuster (2013) highlight that, in the context of the rise of fourth-wave feminism in Europe and North America, feminist blogs and Facebook pages have, in fact, become increasingly popular ways to raise awareness and share information, and have also provided

unprecedented platforms for interaction and discussion. Similarly, the Internet is also increasingly used by Arab cyberfeminists to raise awareness about social injustices which affect women either directly or indirectly in their everyday lives. *Egyptian Feminist* (2015) pointed out in her interview: “*Egyptian Feminist’s* message is to empower women and spread awareness about the discrimination women face on a daily basis in Egypt particularly. The Internet gave me the support I needed.” Hence, cyberfeminism has played a key role in developing our selected interviewees’ awareness about feminist issues and helping them educate other women.

Therefore, our analysis has revealed similar patterns of interaction and topics of interest between fourth-wave feminists in the West and Arab cyberfeminists today. Several articles on *Egyptian Feminist’s* page, such as the “Inside Egypt’s Sexual Harassment Crisis,” aim to denounce the extent of sexual harassment in Egypt, which can be likened to “The Everyday Sexism Project” led by fourth-wave feminists in the UK and their anti-harassment campaigns (Cochrane 2013). In addition, many articles on the *True Lebanese Feminist* page focus on the beauty industry and its disastrous effects on the lives of women; one photo post reads: “the beauty industry relies on us feeling unhappy with and ashamed of our bodies” (Amro 2015). The effects of the beauty industry standards and ideals on women has also been a core concern of fourth-wave feminism in the West (Cochrane 2013).

## On Transnationalism

Another aspect of fourth-wave feminism is the development of a transnational mass movement connecting women activists. Fourth-wave feminists in the West are currently developing a network of solidarity to effectively denounce social injustices and misogyny across national borders, as social media tools enhance women’s ability to network at regional, national, and international levels (Carrier 2015; Licudine 2015). Likewise, cooke (2016, 31) characterizes current Middle Eastern women’s activism as “a transnational feminist revolution.” For Arab

women activists, the “collective identity and character” that is forged through Arab women’s online movements appears in the ways in which they challenge gender inequality and unite women and men activists across Arab states (Al Rawi 2014, 1147).

Increasingly growing as an effective tool to educate, raise awareness, and promote women’s empowerment, the Internet has facilitated the breaching of physical and geopolitical boundaries in the Arab region. It has enabled activists to reach out to a wider feminist audience across the region and beyond, as well as to attract support from a broad range of activists, as Xena Amro of *True Lebanese Feminist* explains: “through social media, I was able to reach more people, from different countries, and I was able to be highly aware of the impact the posts were making on young girls specifically, for they realized they are not alone in this patriarchal society” (Amro 2015). In fact, new media technologies contribute to giving voice to women in the region and facilitate their practice of citizen journalism, allowing them to communicate with the outside world in a transnational way (Gheyntanchi and Moghadam 2014). This finding coincides with Munro’s (2013, 23) study of fourth-wave feminism which shows how the Internet is creating a global community of feminists who use the Internet to educate themselves on topics they lack knowledge about and spread feminist awareness and activist ideals. In our interview with *Egyptian Feminist*, the young woman activist also told us that she is primarily interested in issues affecting women in the region:

I wrote about feminist issues I could relate to like: Why is it okay for a man to have premarital affairs and not okay for a woman? Why should women inherit half as much as a man according to Islam? Why are women supposed to stay at home and aspire to marriage? Why do women stay in abusive relationships? (*Egyptian Feminist* 2015).

She added that the instrumentalization of religion is at the origin of many of those issues: “I focus especially on female genital mutilation, rape (and marital rape), using religion to give women an inferior status



in society, domestic violence and virginity testing” (*Egyptian Feminist* 2015).

The feminist movement in the Arab region has also shown a growing concern with women’s rights not only in the Middle East and North Africa but also across the globe. The “About” section of the *Egyptian Feminist* page reads: “Feminism is Global – We’re not free unless our sisters are free.” Another example includes a recent post on the *Egyptian Feminist* Facebook page which commends a village in India where inhabitants plant a tree to celebrate the birth of a girl, highlighting the existence of transnational solidarities between today’s feminists globally as the blog entry recognized a feminist initiative taking place at the other side of the world. *Egyptian Feminist* (2015) also said that the majority of her fans are from Egypt and the USA. As a consequence of the efficacy of women’s transnational activism, one of the achievements of fourth-wave feminism in the Arab region appears in the ways in which it facilitates Arab women’s access to the public sphere and empowers them to strive for reaching a status of equal citizenship.

### **The Internet as a Tool to improve Women’s Access to the Public Sphere**

In addition to advocating human rights and a sense of social justice for all (Carrier 2015; Cochrane 2013), fourth-wave feminists continue to highlight women’s need to access fully and safely the public sphere. Current fourth-wave feminist activists in the Arab region also use the Internet to promote, at a transnational level, women’s access to the public sphere and denounce the prevalence of the traditional gender roles and the ongoing discrimination against women in the region. An article on the *True Lebanese Feminist* page discusses a social issue that is of growing concern in the region: men’s dominance in the public sphere and the stigmatization of women in the private sphere. The article honors an Egyptian mother who dressed as a man for 43 years to provide for her family. As revealed in an Alarabiya article, “her situation was complicated by a local culture opposed to women in the workplace, which forced her to dress as a man and work

outside the home to support her baby daughter Houda” (Abdelmajeed 2015). In fact, the role of the local culture which imposes strict codes of modesty for Arab women is significant. As a result, women develop bargaining and survival techniques in the face of challenging cultural and societal norms (Kandiyoti 1988). Equal access to the public sphere, which is considered to be an exclusive male domain, and increased mobility for women are core concerns for fourth-wave feminist activists in the region today.

Therefore, online women activists’ newly gained visibility in the region defies the classical dichotomy of public–private and man–woman that was used to characterize Arab women’s lives in many secularization–modernization theories and promote their image as powerless, helpless and submissive (Hosni 2017). In this sense, the online sphere becomes a gateway through which Middle Eastern women can voice their concerns and advocate their right to access the public sphere as it constitutes an essential step toward their full empowerment.

### **Third Wave Feminism and Intersectionality**

One of the main tenets of fourth-wave feminists in the West is their foregrounding of third-wave feminism beliefs, including the concept of intersectionality (Carrier 2015; Cochrane 2013; Munro 2013). In fact, other third-wave concerns also include the fight against racism and anti-imperialism; in her interview, *Egyptian Feminist* stated: “I personally believe that feminism is intersectional and fights for the equality of everyone” (*Egyptian Feminist* 2015). Arab cyberfeminists’ emphasis on the question of intersectionality is similar to women of color’s emphasis on this point in the West – the ways in which different axes of identity including gender and race come together to create a sense of self, and how identity cannot be reduced to a unique characteristic such as gender. By putting the emphasis on the notion of intersectionality, women of color in the West sought to demark themselves from White feminists who viewed womanhood as an all-encompassing category and neglected to take into consideration differences between women and the ways in which positions

of privilege impact their unifying potential. In such an attempt to demarcate themselves from mainstream white feminism, our selected interviewees have underscored their lack of identification with fourth-wave feminism as it emerged and has been theorized in the West. *Egyptian Feminist* (2015) distinguished Arab feminism from Western feminism in her interview: “we still have a long way to go in women’s rights issues in comparison to the West.” Likewise, Xena Amro also stated that: “there are wider debates [about feminism] today but they all stem from unjust attitudes towards women. Wider debates reach religion and political issues which indirectly affect women” (Amro 2015).

In addition, third-wave feminism is also concerned with the integration of male activists’ perspectives. In her interview, Xena Amro said that: “My page is also targeting men to become more supportive towards the feminist movement” (Amro 2015). To support her point, an article on her page celebrates 100 Lebanese men who walked in heels in Beirut to denounce violence against women and support women who are fighting against abusive partners (Najib 2015).

## Human Rights and Social Justice

In Europe and North America, fourth-wave feminist activists not only challenge or “call out” sexism, but also other social injustices online (Carrier 2015; Munro 2013). Women in the Arab region have also used the Internet and ICTs’ momentum to continue to incorporate the framework of human rights and social justice to their struggle for gender equality. As relevant literature on the subject demonstrates, MENA women activists integrate issues of women’s rights into their blogs to demand that women be granted equal rights in social movements and contentious politics. (Gheyntanchi and Moghadam 2014, 19).

Through a strategic use of new media technologies, the selected women activists were able to integrate aspects of regime change, conflict resolution, democracy building, human rights, and social justice into their initial struggle for gender equality. In her interview, *Egyptian Feminist*,

argues that: “feminists should not disregard issues such as Syrian crisis, immigration, war, racism, climate change, poverty which affect women both directly and indirectly. In some of these situations, more women are affected than men” (*Egyptian Feminist* 2015). In addition, a picture post on the Egyptian Feminist shows Pakistani women marching in the streets to demonstrate against the Talibans’ regime and the atrocities committed against women and all citizens alike because of religious fundamentalism. In fact, a core objective of fourth-wave feminism has been to incorporate wider social and human rights concerns which affect women in order to achieve gender equality (Carrier 2015; Cochrane 2013). Women activists in the region therefore seem to take interest in pressing human rights issues, which affect women and their social status.

## Arab Spring Specificity

In the context of the Arab uprisings, women around the region have played a significant role in their countries’ democratic transitions – women’s movements and broader social movements became “intertwined social phenomenon” (Gheyntanchi and Moghadam 2014, 2). Women activists played a leading role in the Arab uprisings through their strategic use of digital technologies, at three important stages: first, during the mobilization phase, when women called on other people to join the protests; second, in the documentation of events and experiences of the revolutions; and finally in the cultural dissemination phase, where women activists have been able to move from critiquing to contributing to social justice and the development of their societies (Hosni 2017).

First, as part of the mobilization phase, Egyptian women online activists and bloggers played a leading role in mobilizing mass demonstrations of women and girls during the uprisings (Naber 2011). Asmaa Mahfouz, a young twenty-five-year-old woman played an important role at the start of the Egyptian revolution through her viral YouTube video that called for massive participation in the January 25 demonstrations and the abandonment of chauvinist and misogynist attitudes. Similarly, famous hashtags such as *#SidiBouزيد* and *#Jan25* also played a key role in fueling

the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions and were posted across many platforms run by women.

In addition, the selected women activists rose to stardom as citizen journalist figures thanks to their role in cyberfeminism and in documenting the uprisings. In Egypt, women activists' increased familiarity with social media tools was a push factor for them to go out to the streets and film the protests, posting the content live on various blogs in order to rally national, regional, and international support. In Tunisia, activist Lina Ben Mhenni's blog, *A Tunisian Girl*, served as a major informational source to document the Jasmin revolution and call for international support by using pictures and videos recorded live during the uprisings and uploaded onto the blog. Content from *nawaat.org*, an independent collective blog featuring leading Tunisian (women and men) dissident voices, and from *les Révolutionnaires de la Dignité* platform, which also included several women among their activists, served as important news feeds to keep the international community informed about the progress of the revolution as well as call for international support. As indeed revealed by the literature, two key features of the mass social protests that characterized the Arab Spring are the significant reliance on ICTs for the purposes of mobilization and documentation, including mobile phone technologies and satellite TV, and the large presence of women in the protests (Gheytanchi and Moghadam 2014, 2). However, the conjuncture of the Arab Spring also meant for women an unsafe Tahrir Square in Cairo, gang rapes in the street during protests in Egypt, and a police officer dragging a topless woman with what will become an iconic blue bra in Egypt<sup>5</sup>. Despite the unsafety of the streets, women continued their involvement in democracy building and reconciliation processes, as part of the cultural dissemination phase. One enlightening example is Lina Ben Mhenni's initiative to promote a culture of human rights in Tunisian prisons through her blog *A Tunisian Girl*, through which she denounced several human rights violations committed against non-violent protesters by official authorities during the uprisings. In post-revolutionary Tunisia, Lina Ben Mhenni, together with her father Sadok, a former political prisoner under Ben Ali's regime, launched the "Books to Prisons" campaign for political prisoners who went on hunger strikes to

claim their right to read in Tunisian prisons. Inspired by her father's seven-year-long imprisonment experience, their initiative aimed to both counter the radicalization of inmates and provide them with some productive enjoyment.

Therefore, women's increasing use of blogs during the Arab Spring uprisings had two significant implications in terms of social movement theorizing. First, women bloggers tended to adopt a non-violent stance, and therefore to promote values such as democracy, peace, and inclusion in their societies (Gheyntanchi and Moghadam 2014). Such characteristics, we argue, also reflect the humanist stance of fourth-wave feminism in the Arab region. As defined by Lamont (1997), humanism emphasizes the "interconnectedness of humankind and peace on earth" and the "establishment throughout the world of democracy, peace, and a high standard of living" (1997, 56). In this sense, women's online forms of activism during the Arab Spring could suggest the start of a new chapter for women's activism in the region (Khamis 2011). Furthermore, this analysis showed that they coincide with current understandings of fourth-wave feminism as theorized in the West.

### Concluding Remarks

Whereas existing literature focuses on the rise of fourth-wave feminism in Europe and North America, this study aims to address this gap in the literature by investigating the rise of fourth-wave feminism in the Arab region, in order to assess its main characteristics and social implications. This research examines a unique historical development: the rise of fourth-wave feminism in the Arab region in the geopolitical context of the Arab Spring uprisings. Previous research has revealed that young Arab women activists have actively mobilized new media technologies, more specifically the Internet and social media, as crucial tools to press for regime change, democracy, and social justice in the context of the Arab Spring (Gheyntanchi and Moghadam 2014; Khamis 2011). Both previous research (e.g., Hosni 2017) as well as our own findings in this study demonstrate that women activists in the region have "extended" their early online activism to offline activism. During the early stages, they called for mobilization in the protests

of the Arab Spring. The subsequent phase consisted of the recording–documentation of the protests. Finally, during the cultural dissemination phase, women online activists from the Arab states have been claiming their rights. Despite the enduring problem of the digital divide in the region, the analysis revealed that recent developments in Arab women’s activism in the context of the Arab Spring exemplify core characteristics of fourth-wave feminism. Such features include primarily the mobilization of ICTs to put an end to authoritarian rule and advance the gender equality cause in the region. Although the selected activists did not clearly identify with fourth-wave feminism when interviewed, their initiatives displayed such characteristics. In addition, recent geopolitical and technological developments have facilitated the development of transnational solidarities between feminist activists in the Arab region, where access to the online sphere has paved the way for greater access and mobility within the public sphere, therefore resulting in women’s empowerment and their ability to incorporate wider social issues of peacebuilding, human rights, and social justice to their feminist agendas. These recent developments reflect the growing humanist stance of fourth-wave feminism: a key tenet in Humanist philosophy is the equal entitlement to dignity and respect of all human beings and their interconnectedness (Lamont 1997, 56).

However, fourth-wave women activists in the Arab region have also faced online harassment and “doxing” – a phenomenon that typically refers to the publication of private information on a specific individual on the Internet with a malicious intent. Xena Amro’s Facebook page, *True Lebanese Feminist*, was blocked and reported on several occasions. Amro was harassed and threatened, but she insisted on keeping her page online and further expanding it. For several years, *Egyptian Feminist* relied on anonymity to conduct her activism: even her friends, relatives, and father did not know that she was the administrator of *The Egyptian Feminist* Facebook page as she feared that feminism is still widely considered a taboo topic in Egypt. She has also been concerned about the ways in which feminist activism can lead to significant personal and social costs in the country. Ultimately, cyberactivist Lina Ben Mhenni was also assaulted and tortured by the Tunisian police in 2012 for protesting article 28 of

the new constitution which emphasized complementary roles for men and women within the society (interview with Errazzouki 2012). However, starting in 2013, Lina lived under close protection of the police because of increased terrorist threats directed at her. These attacks against feminists in the region exemplify the backlash against feminism and the associated personal and social costs of cyberactivism.

The findings of this study are thus significant because they point to the possibilities and obstacles facing cyberfeminists and fourth-wave feminism in the region. A limitation of this study is the limited number of case studies, as the analysis was based on the online interventions of three feminist activists (Tunisian, Egyptian, Lebanese). However, the focus of this qualitative analysis was on providing an in-depth exploration of the potential and limits of such interventions, in the pursuit of gender justice. Future research could expand on the similarities and differences between the emergence of fourth-wave feminism characteristics in the Arab region in comparison to elsewhere, as well as the transnational characteristics which blur some lines between the “here” and “there.” It could also explore the online expressions and articulations of women’s rights in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, and the extent to which their active contributions to the struggle against authoritarian regimes were translated (or not) into more egalitarian legislation and material change enhancing their equal participation in their societies’ political, economic, and cultural life.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In feminist studies, the concept of intersectionality refers to the ways in which different axes of identity such as race, social class, and sexuality, come together to create a sense of self (Mohanty 1991). The concept emerged out of a concern of a previous (and White) homogenization of the “woman” category which unrecognized differences between women and the hierarchies of power that separate them.

<sup>2</sup> According to Snyder (2008), sex-positive feminism refers to a prosex attitude of third-wave feminists, born out of the sex wars and split within second-wave feminists. Third-wave feminists claimed to adopt a less judgmental stance on sexuality, pleasure, and symbols of femininity than their predecessors.

<sup>3</sup> In regards to the link between queer theory and third-wave feminism, Mann and Huffman (2005) state that: “Young feminists also are more likely to embrace the postmodern politics of queer theory, especially on issues related to sexuality. As a consequence, they promote a feminism that is more inclusive of a profusion of gendered subjects, like butch, femme, transsexuals, and transgendered people. They also tend to view the second wave as a prudish feminism that ‘has put up more restrictions than green lights when it comes to sexuality’ (Alfonso and Trigilio 1997, 12)” (2005, 72).

<sup>4</sup> In this article, we are using the terms “Arab region” and “Arab women” to refer to the 22 Arab-speaking countries which are part of the Arab league. It is important to recognize however the many other non-Arab ethnic groups left out of the designation “Arab,” which is often mistakenly conflated with the label “Muslim.” When quoting the relevant literature, we use the terminology of the scholarly work (“Muslim,” “Middle Eastern,” “MENA...”).

<sup>5</sup> The victim of police brutality was shown in a photograph as topless and wearing a blue bra, which later became a symbol of dissent in Facebook and other online platforms. Many shared the photograph on Facebook with the message “down with military rule [in Egypt].” The woman was participating in a protest at the occasion of the Women’s International day in 2011 in Cairo (Gheyntanchi and Moghadam 2014).

# Knowledge Disembodied: From Paper to Digital Media

Abdullah Ibrahim Omran

Indiana University

## Abstract:

*Print and digital media are believed to have shaken religious authority in the Muslim world, essentially because they popularize and pluralize Islamic knowledge. But how exactly did these novel technologies affect the nature of knowledge production and the behavior of scholars and the public? The pages that follow explore the historical relationship between technological developments and the production and transmission of knowledge over the course of Islamic history, commencing with the adoption of paper and concluding with the spread of digital media. A role-based approach is employed to reflect the gradual diminishment of the early methods of knowledge acquisition as “knowledge” came to be commodified according to the market logic of capitalism and subject to mass production and consumption via the technologies of print and electronic media. This approach reflects the interplay between knowledge producers, consumers, and communication mediums. The writer concludes that new media introduces new means of communication and contributes, along with other social, economic, and political factors, to the gradual disintegration of earlier forms of knowledge acquisitions.*

## Keywords:

*media, knowledge production, scholars*

*Knowledge will not give you a part of it until you give it all of yourself.*  
(Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī and Khaṭīb 1996, 252)

Mediums are vehicles for transmission of any sort of knowledge. Their structure offers affordances as well as limitations that characterize the manner, volume, and attitude of knowledge transmission. Mediums played an elaborate history in the production of Islamic knowledge that has been susceptible to drastic developments with the integration of



the following mediums: paper, print, and digital media. Orality was the primary mean of knowledge production, which demanded extensive memorization typical of oral culture (Ong 2012, 57). Writing, as a secondary tool, existed on parchment and papyrus until the advent of paper in the eighth century when Muslim merchants traveling along the Silk Road discovered it in China, where paper technology was first invented around the first century C.E. The introduction of this technology into the already flourishing civilization of the Abbasid Dynasty revolutionized the paper market, previously stocked up with cotton-made paper, palm fibers, and expensive parchment. Factories were built to manufacture paper, the number of booksellers spiked, and the dissemination of knowledge broadened to an unprecedented degree resulting in an exponential increase in literacy rates albeit significantly modest in comparison with the consequential literacy of the print technology and the later digital media.

Paper, print, and digital media have expanded the mass distribution of Islamic knowledge. The social interaction with these technological changes is made visible in the teacher–student relationship, the introduction of new merchandise (e.g. bookshops in Baghdad markets and online bookstores), and the creation of new forms of employment. As a result, Islamic knowledge producers and consumers projected multifaceted responses with the integration of each of the above mediums into the social life. To investigate such responses, the writer employs a role-based approach to show how paper, print, and digital media impacted religious knowledge production in Islam. Born in the sociology of automation, the role-based approach, theorized by the organizational theorists Stephen R. Barly, investigates technologically-induced social changes at various levels of analysis that spans individual and dyadic levels of analysis leading up to the overarching level of the whole organization. In so doing, the researcher is faced with several tasks wherein one must:

[...] show how specific technologies influence tasks, skills, and the other nonrelational aspects of work roles. Second,

researchers must indicate how these changes influence relations among incumbents of different roles. Finally, one would need to examine properties of the organization's social network to determine whether shifting role relations have affected the network's configuration. (Barley 1990, 70)

Following the three levels of analysis, the writer reflects on the agency of individuals situated in their social, political, and economical contexts in line with the media practice theory, which, as Postill explains, sidesteps structural models of media influence as well as individual-centered approaches (Bräuchler and Postill 2010, 6–7). Couldry, a major theorist of the media practice approach, shows how the above-mentioned agency can be addressed in two main questions: “what types of things do people *do* in relation to media? And what types of things do people *say* in relation to media? [emphasis added]” (Couldry 2004, 121). Accordingly, the writer argues that new media introduces new means of communication and contributes, along with other social, economic, and political factors, to the gradual disintegration of earlier forms of knowledge acquisitions. For example, *Isnād* (chain of ḥadīth transmission) was developed partly in response to political and social factors brought about by the sectarian divide and the need to preserve the Prophet's tradition (Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj al-Qushayrī 1994, 44) before the introduction of paper in Islam. This rendered the oral memorization of reports with their respective chains of transmission critical, only not to be seen as a necessity due to the paper-saturated market and the recording of reports in ḥadīth compilations. Memorization, as a mean of knowledge acquisition, lost its attraction even more following the invention of print, the worldwide embrace of mass education that increased literacy, and the cloud storage of information on the Internet. As new media unfold, knowledge producers and consumers develop a gradual engagement and heavily rely on them, thus causing earlier means of knowledge acquisition to falter, disembodiment knowledge from its human vessels through undercutting memory and advancing abstractive analysis (common in transitions from oral to written culture, as the article shows below), and introducing a novel concept of knowledge; one that

is not entirely distinct from its earlier form but generally integrative of the new media.

## Paper

In a typical setting of an early Muslim knowledge circle, the teacher would orally educate his students on the various disciplines of Sharia through repetitions. Some students would record the narrations of their teachers on parchments that were quite expensive and heavy, thus inaccessible to all students. Admittedly, orality was at the center of early Islamic education though not singularly responsible for its development; writing, too, had a critical role as Toorawa (2005) shows in his study of the bookman *Ibn Abī Tābir*. Goody (1987) in his exploration of the impact of the written Islam on the oral cultures of West Africa, and Robinson (2003, 174) in his explanation of the contribution of writing to Islamic historiography. As for orality, it demanded memorization as a necessary part of the learning process. It was essential for two reasons: (1) to maintain the highest standards in deciding the soundness or rejection of ḥadīth reports; and (2) greater memorization and accuracy were tokens of respected scholars (Maqdisi 1981, 99; Bloom 2001, 97). In this learning model, the labor of memory is strenuous though encouraged by a strong and effective spiritual urge sufficient to energize and produce scholars with prodigious skills of memorization. The available writing tools were the Egyptian papyrus, leaves of palm trees, silk skin, and parchment, all of which were cumbersome (Ibn al-Nadīm and Tajaddud 1971, 22). This created an intimate relationship between the scholars and the students. Consider the following report demonstrating such a relationship: one of the most prominent scholars Shu‘ba ibn al-Ḥajāj (C.E. 777) said: “Not have I ever audited any number of ḥadīth reports from anyone except that I have visited them more times than the number of those reports” (Khatīb al-Baghdādī and Khatīb 1996, 289). This reference to the number of visits paid to the scholars reflects the nature of learning at that time. The lack of mediums encourages a close dyadic relationship between the teacher and student, thus fostered both accuracy of delivery and reception of knowledge while decreasing the chance of misappropriation of what is taught. Certainly, there was a considerable level of writing on parchment during the seventh

and eighth century, part of which began at the time of the Prophet and continued until the introduction of paper (Zahrānī 1996, 79).

By the mid-eighth century following the battle of Talas in 751, Ziyad ibn Salih, the Muslim commander, introduced papermaking to Samarqand (Bloom 2001, 9). It had not taken long before the Abbasids realized the potential of paper to catapult the empire into a new era of productivity, whether in the bureaucratic or scholarly domains. As a writing tool paper is light, relatively cheap, foldable, and movable at a quicker pace than any of the previous tools. The Barmakid vizier al-Faḍl ibn Yaḥyā introduced and manufactured paper for documentation of land contracts and other government-related purposes, and it was later embraced in scholarly writing to such an extent that bookshops and stationaries were established to meet the rising demand (Ibn Khaldūn and Wafī 2005, 889). Certainly, the adoption of paper in the scholarly circles was not immediate, simply because the oral culture was suspicious of heavy reliance on paper for scholarly documentation, believing paper to be susceptible to manipulation and distortion, as opposed to the memorization and dissemination of knowledge through oral transmission. Therefore, the Quran was not written on paper but was rather kept in parchments due to a lack of trust in the former. This attitude was similarly embraced by Christians and Jews, all of whom opted to preserve the scriptures on parchment rather than paper (Bloom 2001, 52). However, after paper became pervasive and unavoidable, it became the *de facto* medium for writing. This lack of trust in paper reflects one of the aspects when religious knowledge is alienated from the heart, a phenomenon that increases with the introduction of new media that occupy an intermediary space between the learner and the internalized material.

Paper began to be manufactured in Samarkand in the Abbasid Caliphate and was later introduced into Baghdad in 794–95, according to the historian Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī. Afterward, paper factories were built in various capitals of the Islamic world such as Cairo, Damascus, Tripoli, etcetera, offering various options for paper quality, influenced by the productions of Baghdad and Samarkand (‘Awwād n.d., 420, 428). As a result, new jobs were created in service of the promulgation of paper and the prosperous scholarly life in

Baghdad. Those jobs included copyists, stationers, booksellers, calligraphers, and bookbinders. The paper industry thrived and an independent market for bookselling was established in Baghdad called *Sūq al-Warāqīn* (i.e. a market for selling paper, books, and stationing equipment). This market was a landmark in Baghdad and served as the destination of scholars, literary figures, and government officials, some of whom were scholars themselves.

As Bloom (2001, 12) puts it, paper “had a transformative effect on medieval Islamic civilization, spurring an extraordinary burst of literary creativity in virtually all subjects from theology to the natural sciences and literature.” The stationary market was the location where scholars would visit to read, engage in scholarly discussions, and sometimes hold debates. It is reported that the renowned and towering literary figure Al-Jāhīz (d. 868) would rent a bookshop for a whole night solely to read books and he would not leave until he had finished the book (āqūt ibn ‘Abd Allah al-Ḥamawī 1993, 872).

Pragmatic literacy (Van Berkel 2007, 1665) thrived in various domains in the Muslim world. The need for literacy was required to staff government posts and document contracts. Literacy began at an early stage in the *Maktabs* where children were taught elementary reading, writing, and math in order to be later qualified for various careers (Hanna 2007, 188). Hugh Kennedy points out that:

[...] the circumstantial evidence points to a high degree of literacy far beyond official and secretarial circles. In western Europe in the middle ages, literacy was the preserve of a religious class, but this was not so in the Islamic lands, where reading and writing were widespread through all areas of society. Of course, there were many reasons for this, but one of the most important was that Arabic literacy was useful in this society because it gave access to jobs, and in some cases power. (Kennedy 2017, 99–100)

The manufacturing of paper and the booming business of bookselling boosted rates of literacy because professional opportunities emerged and

had to be filled. Surely, given the aforementioned restraint of scholars towards paper and the increasing reliance on written rather than oral transmission of knowledge, some criteria were needed to maintain the authenticity of knowledge production. For example, a copyist must be educated in Arabic writing skills, dictation rules, and good handwriting. He must also be endowed with an elementary knowledge of the subjects of his labors, and above all recognized as a person of integrity to inspire confidence in his product. Reputable booksellers and copyists whose work claimed high esteem and admiration were in great demand. Still, some scholars undertook the task of copying their work or others' works by their hands to avoid any room for suspicion and maintain high accuracy standards. Once a copyist concludes the transcript, one additional stage is required before publishing the book, namely to compare it with the original manuscript, *Muqāballa*. Another manner was to read the copied version aloud before the author who would authenticate the copy and grant permission of publishing, otherwise called *Ijāza* (Pedersen, French, and Hillenbrand 2014, 47). These are gatekeeping measures to retain the credibility of the written book. Because seeking knowledge *was an end* in and of itself and was encouraged by the Prophet to gain the satisfaction of God, fear of distortion preoccupied Muslim scholars. Books centered on the biographies of scholars, transmitters, copyists, transcribers, poets, and orators were authored for the eventual purpose of authenticating statements and tracing them back to their original producers.

At the overarching level of scholarship, the third layer of analysis, the flourishing Abbasid state attracted increasing numbers of students and scholars from widely diverse backgrounds who traveled to capitals of learning across the Muslim lands. Their numbers were massive, and several changes took place to accommodate such growth. For one, scholars appointed assistants, *Mustamlīs*, to attend to class procedures. Tasks included repetition of the scholars' words to the large crowds of students, some of whom were recording in paper while others were listening and memorizing. At other times, a scholar would hold a public reading of his works where he would read them for his students and for copyists to record. In a later development, students were capable of purchasing books of

scholars they had no contact with, thus engaging in second-hand learning. Books, as a medium, interfered in the relationship between teachers and students, though aided both of them in various ways. For teachers, books attracted larger numbers of students into their circle, which translated into wider popularity and earned some of them an international reputation, not to mention garnering benefit when reading works of their peers and predecessors. For students, books were materialized knowledge that they could read, review, and consult at will. For this reason, strict measures had to be taken to preserve the authenticity of those books against distortions, which did occur. As a result, some of its perpetrators were caught and warned against.

As far as what knowledge producers say and do with regards to the new medium of books, the literature shows how some scholars have cautioned against self-taught students. Sa‘id ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Tunūkhī (d. C.E. 783) said: “Neither seek knowledge from autodidacts, *Ṣuḥufī*, nor learn Quran from a *Muṣḥafī* [who memorized the Quran without the supervision of a teacher]” (Ibn Abu Ḥātim 1952, 31). To better understand this statement, there is yet another famous quote by the early great scholar Ibn Sirīn that provides a window into understanding why there would be a caution against learning from a self-taught individual. The narration states: “Indeed, knowledge is [part] of faith, so consider carefully from whom you are taking your faith” (Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj al-Qushayrī 1994, 42). A self-taught individual who lacks the guidance of a teacher could easily misunderstand and thus misappropriate the text. One should keep in mind that the mass distribution of books at that early stage of book publishing was novel, which spurred such precautions. This also suggests that oral communication and discussions were key to the scholarly formation of students. Religious books, on their own, require not only an interpreter but also the type of interpreter who is steeped in the knowledge of the literature by heart.

On the empirical side, knowledge producers developed a full-fledged system that identifies and assesses reporters of the Prophet’s statements and actions known as *‘Ilm al-Rijāl* (biographical assessment of ḥadīth reporters).

This system was a response to the political expansion of Islam and the increasing mobility of ḥadīth reporters, creating a plethora of narrations whose authenticity must be assessed. Certain criteria were put in place, the most relevant to this article is the necessity of writing down reports for the purpose of accurate delivery and reception. Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (1975, 64) dedicated a book on documenting knowledge and named it *Ṭaḥqīq al-‘ilm* where he presented the opinions of proponents and opponents of ḥadīth writing, concluding that pinning knowledge to writing became necessary as reporters’ names and nicknames have swelled beyond the capacity of memorization. Because orality was conjoined to writing, this system was intended to provide a backup to the oral transmission.

As a medium, books transformed the participant structure by augmenting second-hand reception of knowledge through the new agents introduced in the enterprise of religious knowledge production such as stationers, booksellers, copyists, and teaching assistants. Over time, the oral tradition of *Isnād* came to a halt, and reliance on books surged. This can be shown in the diffusion of public and private libraries storing thousands of books, such as *Bayt al-Ḥikmah* (House of Wisdom) and *Dār al-‘Ilm* (House of Knowledge). When contemplating the consequences of the promulgation of the book culture and establishment of libraries, an interesting idea springs to the imagination, namely the *translocation of knowledge* from memory (intangible) to paper (tangible). This translocation made knowledge more accessible for various social classes, transferrable in a book form, and bordered between two covers.

Walter J. Ong (2012, 43–44) showed that transition from orality to writing fosters abstractions and, “separates the knower from the known. By keeping knowledge embedded in the human lifeworld, orality situates knowledge within a context of struggle.” In light of this, increasing numbers of books were authored addressing the explanation of the prophetic reports, Qur’anic verses, and jurisprudence. Regarding jurisprudence, the four schools of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence were established and gained popularity not solely by merit of their founders but also through the books authored by their disciples and followers. After



the transition from orality to writing was fully achieved, a new transition appeared on the horizon though much later in time. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the production of religious books predominated the market due to the greater demand of middle-class Muslims (Hanna 2003, 80). Why does this predomination matter? This question will be answered in the following section.

## Print Technology

It should not be misconstrued from the above discussion that books were as widespread as they have come to be following the invention of print. One needs to take into consideration the hours-long endeavor just to produce a single manuscript, let alone a library of titles with several copies of each title. The transition from script to print is unique on its own accord. On multiple occasions in her major work on print, Elizabeth Eisenstein stressed that underestimating the role of print in history can be easily underappreciated because of the rapid technological innovation that renders the print technology an obsolete novelty. She noted that, through the production of printed material, a displacement of the public religious oration, as well as weakening of community ties, ushered in, simply because reading is an individual task while oration requires the gathering (Eisenstein 2005, 131–132). In comparison to script culture, print offers accuracy, standardization, expedient delivery of tasks, less manpower, and most importantly a genuine mass availability of books. However, for the business to succeed, it requires a broad base of readership to consume the printed books. The main consumer of books in medieval Islam was the establishments of religious education that constituted the lion's share of book production and consumption. This educational milieu provided the conducive atmosphere for cultivating students of a high caliber, partly because religious education served as a mean to a decent living and a position in the bureaucracies in the successive Islamic empires. However, as Islamic empires began to decline simultaneously with the increasing campaigns of colonial European powers who brought with them the print technology, the knowledge landscape had been pushed into a foreign arena whose command lies at the hands of the colonizers.

Print began to have a significant impact on the Muslim world in general, and the Arab world in particular, in the 19th century, which was also a period of widespread European colonization. Print did exist in the 18th century in Istanbul but it was vehemently rejected by religious scholars, due in part to its provenance in non-Muslim, Western lands (Robinson 1993, 232). However, colonial rule and the telegraph played a significant role in the mass adoption of print. Thousands of copies of the Quran as well as classical Islamic works were published. Certainly, mass publishing instituted a break in the traditional oral *Ijiza* tied to securing a higher reputation and credibility necessary for attracting a larger base of consumers in favor of copyists and booksellers. (Robinson 1993; Cole 2002)

In order to properly analyze knowledge production in the context of print technology, we should investigate the new environment in which it was present. Certainly, the most relevant social transformation that coincided with print is *mass education* in the Arab world. In 19th century Egypt, for example, Muhammad Ali wished for Egypt to be a modern state including the launching of a countrywide campaign of military conscription. Part of his scheme was mass education required by all society members. In Europe, mass education was meant “primarily to meet the needs of the Industrial Revolution and, in many ways, [that mirrored] the principles of industrial production ... [emphasizing] linearity, conformity and standardization” (Robinson 2017, 8). It ignores diversity and prioritizes certain subjects over others. In addition, its goal is to produce agents for the benefit of the state, and therefore new subjects had to be taught alongside religious education. A new system of education was established parallel to the traditional al-Azhar education system. In public schools, religion was packaged as a subject of less favorability due to the state’s lack of demand of it. Eickelman noted:

Modern schooling constitutes a significant break with the earlier emphasis upon the written word, mediated by an oral tradition and oriented toward a mastery of accepted religious texts acquired through study under religious scholars recognized by the wider community. At least in formal terms,

a curriculum of specifically delineated subjects and prescribed texts is taught by a changing array of teachers, and competence is measured by examination. (Eickelman 1992, 650)

Taught as a subject to be graded and stylized to suit the various age groups, knowledge has been reduced to blocks of information whose grasp is only meant to score a good grade. Accordingly, “by propagating a *synoptic* [emphasis added] vision of Islamic belief and practice, sanctioned either by the state or by groups of ‘experts’ working in the private sector, mass education and its pedagogical materials effectively create a new Islamic tradition” (Starrett 2010, 128). Morocco and Oman, too, have shown similar results of mass education and print as far as witnessing a break in the traditional authority of religiously trained scholars (Eickelman 1992; 1978). Religious knowledge, therefore, has not only been peripheralized but also imbued with a sense of a carefree graspability wherein non-religiously trained graduates of modern schooling can engage religious knowledge by virtue of their respective secular training.

In her assessment of the relationship between teachers and their students, Eisenstein (2005, 689) asserted: “Previous relations between masters and disciples were altered. Students who took full advantage of technical texts which served as silent instructors were less likely to defer to traditional authority and more respective to innovating trends.” This writer argues that print would not have gained the significance it had merely due to the mass publication of religious books. For this to have occurred, there must have been a large market for such works, and this market existed by virtue of the nascent system of mass education that expanded the potential readership. Before print, there was a huge industry revolving around books that included professions such as copying, paper and book selling, calligraphers, etcetera. Booksellers located across the Muslim lands were great in number and their business stipulated no conditions for access to books that were plentifully available for purchasers and collectors. What changed at the advent of print was the transformation of the educational environment. Wherein religious knowledge production had been central and predominant, it was now synoptic and relegated to the margins in a system of mass education.

The graduates of this new system were the principal consumers of print materials. Because the technology of print is historically linked to the establishment of the modern state, mass education is a tool well-appropriated for its service and conceivably constitutes the thriving market of printed books covering a wide range of religious and non-religious topics. The concern over the wide availability of books is echoed in major authors of that era, namely, Hasan al-Marsafi who, though open to the idea of modern schooling, advocated for restraint in mass printing and the need for a body of scholars to decide what is to be printed (Mitchell 1991, 132).

Another major break from the traditional authority of religious knowledge is the shifting of the state's priorities. In medieval Islam, the Abbasids were patrons of religious knowledge production, thereby pouring resources for the flourishing of the knowledge enterprise, most remarkable of which was the introduction of paper manufacturing as illustrated above. On the other hand, the modern state has different priorities. Technological innovation imposes a rearrangement of the sciences that receive ultra attention to climb the ladder of creativity faster. Moreover, religious institutions have become a part of a state that dictates the regulations, laws, and terms of recruitment. As part of the centralization of the state, control is necessary at every level, which places reins on the agency of the members of religious institutions. The generous funds that used to be dedicated to the service of knowledge producers are redirected into a new venue that suits the priorities of the modern state. Therefore, admittance and graduation from state-run religious institution schools are necessary to earn a living. This constitutes yet another stride in alienation. That is, displacement, not entirely but largely, of the typical knowledge venue (i.e. Mosque and *Madrassa*) by school classrooms in addition to the isolating nature of textbooks that limits interaction between teacher and student. Though knowledge producers have gained greater access to resources and better chances of production through print, their agency has taken a serious hit by the structural organization of the state.

At the overarching level of scholarship, the teacher–student relationship undergoes a serious reshaping by the admittance of new agents whose behavior and decisions are not necessarily in conformity with the patrons

of religious knowledge production. Conditions meant for accuracy of knowledge transmission either orally or in a written form have been challenged, if not dismissed altogether. A new educated class, print, colonization, capitalistic commercialization driving the economy of print (Anderson 1991), and the declining traditional authority have collectively transformed the dynamics of knowledge production and contributing to the ever-increasing distancing between the teacher and student. This bolsters the tendency of individual interpretation of religious knowledge and the growth of self-learning. The introduction of print eroded paper-created jobs like scribes but slightly reembodyed them in professions such as, *Muḥaqqiq al-Turāth*, literary editors tasked with editing works of early religious and literary scholars so that they would be published in print form; a job which witnessed prolific contributions by orientalist at the early 20th century (Hārūn 1988). At the level of the enterprise of knowledge production, there has become a notable and exponentially wider claim to the right of the interpretation of religious knowledge, in addition to the ever-increasing non-religious literature printed to meet the demands of the newly-educated masses. Memorization that used to be central to the flourishing of religious scholarship has waned and become undermined.

### Digital Media and the Internet

*Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?  
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?*  
(Eliot 1934, 7)

In the 1990s and early 2000s, some companies in the Gulf and Iran began distributing and selling text-searchable classic Islamic books in the digitized form of CDs. Later, al-Warraq.net provided such material on the Internet followed by competitive websites uploading a multitude of Arabic resources online. The next phase featured the affordance of those books scanned in PDF format (Zadeh 2016, 18–22). Afterward, large digital libraries crowded the Internet presenting a plethora of material marking the new era of the digital book. Guided by David Hakken's (2003, 34) cautioning against confusing knowledge for information, and heeding T. S. Elliot's

acute distinction between both of them, this section discusses how digital media and the Internet contributed to the alienation of religious knowledge. Admittedly, given the constraint of this paper, the writer limits himself to addressing two elements of this alienation – namely commodification of knowledge and how this drives the technological trajectory towards a manufactured ease of access to information rather than knowledge.

Information is an ocean of data available in print and digital formats and accessible to anyone. Knowledge, on the other hand, is narrowed to the relative personal internalization and learning of such information, thus making the latter an umbrella indexing personal and collective knowledge. Knowledge indispensably mandates training for appropriate acquisition wherein a portion of a large expanse of information is internalized and later reproduced, though emerging in relatively a new fashion, as yet another drop in that ocean of information. Because print technology is fostered by capitalism which seeks to secure large profits, the constant production of material is necessary to sustain the survival of the business. This transformed the character of knowledge and imbued it with an exchange value typical of commodities. In his description of postmodern knowledge, Lyotard noted:

The relationship of the suppliers and users of knowledge to the knowledge they supply and use is now tending, and will increasingly tend, to assume the form already taken by the relationship of commodity producers and consumers to the commodities they produce and consume – that is, the form of value. Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold. (Lyotard and Bennington 2010, 4)

Though the word “knowledge” seems to be confused with information, this model of commodification has persisted into the age of the Internet, fiercer, uncompromising, and gradually replacing the older traditional structure of religious learning. How? Unlike printed books that require individual labor to obtain them in addition to the constraints limiting one’s access to reading, the Internet is almost omnipresent in modern-day life. It is accessible through cellphones, computers, tablets, TVs, libraries, and serves

as a platform hosting nearly every profitable service imaginable. For the acquisition of information, there are plenty of reading applications available on all digital devices and they offer an unlimited number of books. However, those apps coexist alongside myriads of other genres competing for global popularity, which requires a full commitment to capitalist-driven marketing.

The Internet is a colossal storage vessel containing titanic amounts of information. In relation to religious knowledge, scholars and orators have their respective websites where they upload their audio and video lectures of book series, while others do live visual lecturing. Numerous Islamic schools, ideologies, dogmas, orientations, and establishments compete for audiences and followers and must, therefore, play by the rules of the capitalist market to attract demand. The spike of all this bodes well for the popularity of promoting websites and nudges it ahead in the large list of results in popular search engines such as Google. “As a result, the religious tradition, which previously could be authoritatively imposed, now has to be *marketed*” (Berger 1991, 173). Part of today’s digital religious authority not only stems from knowledge expertise but also extensive financial resources to advertise content and secure precedence in search results boosting numbers of the audience and online visibility. Of particular relevance to the major websites of book production, there are some digital Arabic book libraries such as al-Shamela and Waqfeya that offer resources and depositories free for download for users while their patrons pay handsomely for such services including website hosts, cloud storages, promotions, web developers and technical engineers.

Unlike the early period when Islamic religious education flourished under the various medieval Islamic dynasties and where participants of this enterprise of knowledge received social and financial capital for their contributions and learning, the modern ecosystem of digital media has altered the participant structure of this knowledge enterprise by redefining the roles of the participants. Students were burdened with seeking out teachers and traveling in arduous journeys since early adolescence. Now, the map has changed, and scholarly and oratory figures are required to

reach out and approach the online masses of Internet users while spending huge chunks of money to secure a large audience base and promotion on online platforms. Participants have the opportunity to accept, reject, argue, and contest the range of information presented before them. Another key difference, however, is that a large number of participants in online forums are interacting with *information rather than knowledge*. Because materials are available for consumption on the Internet by all types of users regardless of their educational background and due to the fact that cyberspace affords users the opportunity to engage with that material, one would not expect a scholarly exchange unless one is participating in a pre-determined website structure designated for specialized knowledge and its consumers.

In cyberspace learning, the relationship between the student and the teacher has changed from in-person to virtual. Physical attendance of classes, handwritten notes, and study groups are no longer necessary given the affordances provided by digital devices. Rather than relying on memorization as an effective means (Mueller and Oppenheimer 2014), a virtual keyboard has taken over notetaking and removed the retention of knowledge directly from the teacher and his valuable commentaries. The labor exercised in group learning, journeying to study knowledge, attentive listening to the teacher, taking notes while fearful of losing out on whatever the teacher is saying, and disciplined method of learning have been relegated and replaced virtually.

Students can watch lectures wherever and whenever they so desire and all the information they need is available through a few clicks on their devices. In other words, physical labor and toil have been exchanged for comfort. New media concentrated its mission on comforting the body, relaxing memorization capacities, building a space of debate that privileges analysis of available digital-mediated information at the expense of memorization. An international group of researchers wrote a study addressing the likely effects of the Internet on some of the brain cognitive functions. In relation to the memory, they concluded that “the Internet does not place any responsibility on the user to retain unique information for others to draw upon,” and it, “acts as a single entity that is responsible for holding



and retrieving virtually all factual information, and thus does not require individuals to remember what exact information is externally stored, or even where it is located” (Firth et al. 2019, 122).

In addition, methods of reading have even developed, the most attractive of which is skimming. A swift visual scanning of the book involves leafing through its pages to capture the general idea incorporated within. In adapting to the new mediums of digital reading built to advance fast processes and incorporation of large data of information, the mind, as the neuroscientist Maryanne Wolf (2018) indicated, is reoriented to develop a new *reading circuit*. This undercuts critical reading and the graspability of complexity. Skimming is a time-efficient approach to cover as much information as possible but proves ineffective for deep analysis and knowledge internalization. In a study made by the Norwegian psychologist Anne Mangen on the effects of reading on paper versus digital screens in Norwegian schools, she concluded: “reading linear narrative and expository texts on a computer screen leads to poorer reading comprehension than reading the same texts on paper” (Mangen, Walgermo, and Brønnick 2013, 5). Such a technique would not even be conceivable in a scribal culture that forces manuscript readers to painstakingly labor through reading a single manuscript, let alone a number of them.

## Conclusion

The classical argument about the impact of print as well as digital media on the structure of Islamic education is that they have fragmented the authority of ‘*Ulamā*’ (Eickelman and Anderson 2003; Bunt 2018; El-Nawawy and Khamis 2012) because ordinary Muslims now have access to the very material ‘*Ulamā*’. Rather than directing focus towards the empowerment print and digital media facilitated for ordinary people while shrinking the scholars’ authority, it is important to draw attention to other changes in social and educational environments that facilitated such an impact. The traditional method of instruction in religious education relied heavily on the body as a depository of knowledge that utilizes the powers of memorization as well as analysis. Memorization was essential before

the discovery of paper because transmission of prophetic reports had to be delivered orally and the role of analysis was manifested in the examination of reports. After the paper was discovered, chains of transmission came to a halt as written records of Sunna emerged and reliance on oral teaching was restricted to the method of instruction. Conditions for the acceptance of any written material were set to guide copyists, booksellers, calligraphers, and others whose professions intersected with paper and knowledge production. The relationship between the student and the teacher remained intact because the system of Ijaza was the recognizable accreditation for teaching. The discovery of paper opened a wide range of professional opportunities, a great chunk of which had religious learning central to its acquisition. In addition, Arabic language standardization lent religious knowledge production an enormous and strategic advantage that inspired the entire Muslim community to engage in the most privileged enterprise, namely religious education, at various levels.

With the inception of European colonialism, the invention of print technology, the spread of capitalism across the global economy, the establishment of the modern nation-state in Muslim countries, and the ensuing mass education, the compass of learning was oriented towards the service of the modern nation. Because the European powers were the globally dominant force, they enforced capitalism and the insatiable hunger for the wealth of the modern nations in the Muslim territories, thereby driving them to alter their needs. Religious learning was packaged in mass education, relegated to mere service of the state, and gave rise to new generations who contest those in traditional religious authority.

Then the virtual cyberspace permeated, if not invaded, all aspects of life, including the religious one. The means that once empowered the enterprise of religious education – such as memorization, journeying and laborious study – have been undermined and composited into a digital screen, allowing consumers to navigate through mega-sized libraries, audio and video lectures, and fabulous tools fostering individual originality. In a manner of speaking, *knowledge has been disembodied from its human vessels* and presented as information on the World Wide Web. The Internet does

save time and effort, but should knowledge-seeking be managed in such a manner? An interesting story is reported about the great scholar al-Ghazālī where his notes were stolen by bandits during his journey to audit from a scholar. The bandits thought his bag had money but there were only his notes. He begged them to return his notes for which he labored in traveling and studying to collect. However, one of them replied: “how do you claim to know what is inside it? We have taken it from you, and you ended up without any knowledge.” Al-Ghazālī then realized that notetaking is insufficient to call oneself a scholar. Once he returned, he spent three years memorizing everything he has learned so that he would not be stripped of knowledge if he was raided by bandits in any of his journeys (Nuwaylātī 1958, 9–10). This shows that notetaking is another source of storing information yet without reflecting or internalizing its content. However, it was transformed into knowledge once he memorized them afterward. It can be argued that analysis is a cornerstone of knowledge, and indeed it is. However, the quality of analysis is enhanced by the ready retrieval of information achieved through memorization, thus proving it essential for an erudite scholarship.

To conclude, digital media centralizes individual comfort at the heart of its marketing whereas religious learning demands individual labor to secure it. Therefore, it has been disembodied through successive stages of alienation that began as early as the introduction of print technology in the Muslim world and the enforcement of mass education. The process of alienation continued at full speed with the integration of cyberspace into the social fabric.

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