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Victoria A. Newsom

Lara Lengel

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Arab Women, Social Media, and the Arab Spring: Applying the framework of digital reflexivity to analyze gender and online activism

By Victoria A. Newsom¹ and Lara Lengel²

Abstract

This essay analyzes the engagement of Arab feminist activists online, most notably during the citizen revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, and, specifically, women's use of online social networking to aid social change. Building on research examining how Arab activists and activist organizations, including feminist organizations, mobilize, produce knowledge, and develop and share resources online and, in particular, drawing from research on Arab activists and social media this study aims to understand how online activist discourses function, both locally and globally. To do so, we utilize a schema of information production and consumption devised to analyze activist engagement and citizen journalism, particularly the negotiation of communication messages by various agents through multiple stages of transmission and dissemination (Newsom, Lengel, & Cassara, C, 2011). We look at the ideal of local knowledge as it is transformed into global knowledge, and how the messages are open to manipulation and bias through the various stages of mediation and gatekeeping cited in the framework. Through the application of this framework, we can see how gendered messages are constructed, essentialized, reconstructed, and made invisible by the consumer media system.

Keywords: Arab countries, History, Arab Spring Uprisings, 2011, Activism; Democracy; Feminism; Online social networks; Tunisia; Egypt; Protest movements; Symbolic Interactionism; Revolution, Social Media, Social conditions

Introduction

Sahar Khamis (2011) argues, "The prolific online and offline political activities of Arab women over the last several months have contributed a new chapter to the history of both Arab feminism and the region" (p 748). Building on research examining how Arab activists and activist organizations, including feminist organizations, mobilize, produce knowledge, and develop and share resources online (see, for instance, Al Jaber, 2009; Alkhalifa, 2008; Danitz & Strobel, 1999; Fandy, 1999; Faris, 2008a; Faris, 2008b; Earl & Kimport, 2008; Illia, 2003; Jansen, 2010; Tatarchevskiy, 2011; Vegh, 2003; Wheeler, 2009) and, in particular, research on Arab activists and social media (Eltantawy & Wies, 2011; Jansen, 2010; Lotan, et al., 2011), this study aims to understand how online activist discourses function, both locally and globally.

International focus on the Arab world has increased during the "Arab Spring," and recognition of individual women's involvement in the conflicts and demonstrations has risen (Khamis, 2011; Marzouki, 2011). Yet, simultaneously, both traditional and social media cite the absence of gendered revolution or gender-based social change. (UPF Office of Peace and

¹ Professor, Department of Communication Studies, Social Sciences and Humanities Division, Olympic College.
Email: vnewsom@olympic.edu

² Professor, Department of Communication, School of Media and Communication, Bowling Green State University.
Email: lengell@bgsu.edu

Security Affairs, 2012, February 12). We hope to interrogate mediated discourses of women's roles in the Arab Spring based on what Lila Abu-Lughod and Rabab El-Mahdi (2011) assert are "Orientalist understandings of Arab and Muslim women" (p. 683).

To do so, we utilize a schema for what we call *digital reflexivity* (Newsom & Lengel, forthcoming) to analyze the information production and consumption devised to analyze activist engagement and citizen journalism, particularly the negotiation of communication messages by various agents through multiple stages of transmission and dissemination (Newsom, Lengel, & Cassara, 2011). We look at the ideal of local knowledge as it is transformed into global knowledge, and how the messages are open to manipulation and bias through the various stages of mediation and gatekeeping cited in the framework. We argue that the processes of digital reflexivity restrict the message flow from local to global audiences by encouraging the alteration of the initial activist message to fit global needs and values. While messages have always been construed to reach particular audiences, the speed with which digital media transmits current messages, and the treatment of social media messages as "organic" and "native" by contemporary professional news sources distorts recognition of those persuasive and propaganda techniques utilized, thus restricting and containing the empowering potential of activist voices. Hence, the BBC claims that "Facebook Changed the World" by becoming a tool for the "Arab Spring," laying the focus of that message on the global media form, while minimizing and even silencing the powerful voices of Arab activists themselves.

Through the application of this framework, we can see how gendered messages are constructed, essentialized, reconstructed, and made invisible by western corporate media. We see how these messages function as a form of contained empowerment, functioning within their initial social media and localized spaces but losing power as they are translated into the global stage. We see how the processes of digital reflexivity, whereby the messages themselves become reflections of the media forms they exist within as the constant copying and recopying of the messages distorts and blurs their impact. And we can see how this plays into the conflict between the mediated representations of the empowering roles of women during the social changes happening in the Arab world and the absence of gender-based social change.

Locating Online Activism

Online activism, while often tied to offline activist organizations and efforts, differs from conventional activism in several key ways. Online activism affords opportunities for issue-focused efforts that allow activists to identify with and support specific efforts, for promotion of goals and activities that can reach further and more quickly than is the case with traditional activism, potentially reaching beyond its contained status. In addition, online activism occurs in a liminal "third space", a place where traditional rules governing society can be set aside (New Media Consortium, 2007). Rooted in theories of space as constructed by the material needs of its inhabitants, the concept of the third space assumes that space is not empty, socially defined by the contrast between what is experienced in them and what can be imagined for them (Bhabha, 1990; de Certeau, 1984; Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1996).

Building on this concept, this study locates the online activist third space between the concepts and experiences of power, revealing a space of contained empowerment, specifically in the context of women's role and agency in the revolutions in Tunisia, December, 2010 – January, 2011 and Egypt, January - February 2011. The essay is part of a larger research program on civil society and communication technology in North Africa. Specifically, it examines women's use of online social networking to aid social change in these countries. To

interrogate the impact of the revolutions on enhancing gender equality we draw upon extensive field research in Tunisia, collaboration with North African women colleagues, and participant-observation during technology-focused events in the region, most notably the UN World Summit on the Information Society in Tunis. The study also employs discourse analysis to analyze online spaces created specifically for political engagement and agency, and for challenging hegemonic and patriarchal norms and political oppression.

Online activism provides the potential for empowerment to marginalized voices, provides the opportunity for cross-boundary dialogue, and provides an impetus for social change. Online feminist activist spaces attempt to provide the possibility for enacting the ideas of gendered dialogue. Therefore, online feminist activist spaces are an excellent starting point to build a discussion of gendered identity and dialogue online. However, with the relatively low internet penetration in the Middle East and North Africa, online populations consist mostly of women academics and other privileged women. In addition, up until the demise of the Ben Ali and Mubarek regimes citizens self-censored and silenced public political discourse. Such self-silencing occurred more intensively in Tunisia under Ben Ali's rule (Lengel, 2004) and its "harsh offline oppression" (Jansen, 2010, p. 37).

Therefore, we question whether these spaces can in fact provide voice to marginalized persons, or if they are re-creating digital, gender, and political divides. We suggest they are simultaneously empowering and restrained by hegemony, that they provide an impetus if not the means for altering hegemony. As media perpetuates stories, it copies itself in such a way that the content becomes watered down, altered, and taken out of context.

How local voices are reconstructed for global audiences

Online activism at its ideal best is a tool to generate an increase of knowledge about social reform topics, and to engender a positive response toward the reform goals by an increasing audience. However, local knowledge presented as online activism is self-containing if an awareness of a social reform need is a prerequisite to exposure. To break this cycle, local voices must reach an audience outside of their normal range. The "citizen journalism" and other related efforts evident in Arab Spring activism have been reconstructed and re-created by global institutions and power brokers that act as gatekeepers of information flow so that the message can reach a wide audience. To better understand how this process works, the authors constructed a framework (Newsom, Lengel, & Cassara, 2011) that highlights the stages of information flow required. In the framework, first, individuals speak out. Second, resistance leaders may reframe individual voices to suit their needs. Resistance rhetoric is then disseminated into the local area. Next, government may access the resistance rhetoric, reframing or erasing it to their needs. Reframed rhetoric may then be disseminated on a larger scale. Then, the West receives rhetoric and reframes it to suit itself. The framework was designed to determine the movement of information through digital and social media, and how the messages must be negotiated and manipulated at each stage.

Adding a gender component to this framework for this study complicates the process of message production and consumption further, because the Web itself reflects a gendered nature, and, moreover, individual web sites have taken on gendered performances. The technology of the web carries a number of patriarchal and male connotations that function as gatekeeping barriers for information flow at each level of the process. In this study, we look at how these barriers restrict the possibilities of gender-based reform while they encourage other social reform efforts in the Arab Spring.

In the framework of the stages of information flow, first we analyze individual voices speaking out. Many Arab women who became active in the recent uprisings and protests were active as part of a group effort, not uncommon in that area of the world. The concerns voiced by the groups were issues of democratic reform, calls to gain the right for free and open elections, and attacks upon long-held dictatorships. These political issues were themselves not focused on gendered rights. Issues of gender equality in the Arab Spring were largely contained to Tahrir Square in Cairo and to the various Tunisian cities where street protests occurred during the protests in Egypt and Tunisia.

At the second stage of the framework, individual voices may be reframed to suit the needs of others and other organizations. This stage is of particular interest when analyzing gender differences in the Arab World. Such analysis, generally, and the understanding of Arab women and their use of social media in the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, specifically, presents considerable challenges. Mazrui and Mazrui note “Muslim societies have assumed that there were two different doors of knowledge, one for each gender” (p. 54). They argue “individual Muslim men and women are real actors in the information revolution and not merely objects, and that they are producers of knowledge and not merely consumers of knowledge” (p. 55). Also, the many ways in which gender is understood cannot be underestimated. As socially constructed local ideologies of gender are enacted as “normalized” dichotomized male and female performances are presented as natural and salutary rather than artificial and prescriptive (Lengel & Martin, 2010). Foucault (1980) warns of the limitations of negotiating power as a binary opposition of “present” (in the case of the presence of male power and, most notably to this study, the “maleness” inherent in traditionally patriarchal cultures) or “absent” (the disempowered Arab woman) (Bhabha, 2002; Gedalof, 1999; Schroven, 2006). Intersections of gender, agency, power, and activism create even greater disparities, as discussed by Mohanty (1988; 2003), who argues Western feminisms view third world women as victims to be rescued by Western values and feminist motives. Basarudin (2002) suggests “there is an urgent need for a cross-cultural dialogue between Western and Arab feminisms in order to create space that allows differences to be recognized and examined, and crafting a meeting point for women to relate across their differences” (p. 62).

Resistance rhetoric in practice: The case of *lijan sha'abiyya* (popular committees)

Local knowledge, once it is presented to a larger audience, becomes a target for appropriation. There are several reasons why this occurs. First, local knowledge is predominantly temporal, thus its recognition and acceptance is not often clear outside of the original locality until it is restructured and represented to enhance meaning for a larger audience. Second, the aspects of local knowledge and local activism that are deemed significant within a larger world view are often separated from their initial contexts, thus separated from other aspects not deemed as significant outside of their original circumstance. Still another reason for the appropriation of local knowledge is the ability to apply the label of “authenticity” even while the authentic, local ideal is itself being reallocated and contained. The label itself earns a type of activist capital in contemporary society, and encourages a belief on the part of a larger audience that “real” people are being positively and directly witnessed. However, those “real” people are actually limited and restricted by the contained empowerment they are enacting.

This challenge is, in part, methodological. Langlois, Elmer, McKelvey & Devereaux (2009) suggest “instances of political activism point to the growing importance of Facebook as a space where a public can be reached and informed and can enter into a dialogue to discuss issues of common interest and influence political decision-making” (p. 416). The authors (2009) note the “tremendous difficulties in tracking information on private online spaces” and the challenge of “understanding the uniqueness of social networking sites as assemblages where software processes, patterns of information circulation, communicative practices, social practices, and political contexts are articulated with and redefined by each other in complex ways” (p. 416).

The complexity of civil society, either online or offline, under authoritarian regimes adds an additional layer of difficulty, both in the technical (access to social media networks in Tunisia and Egypt), and the conceptual (an understanding of agency under authoritarianism). This is particularly the case for Arab women, who are often essentialized as powerless by Western discourses (Lengel, 1997; Newsom & Lengel, 2003; Newsom, Cassara, and Lengel, 2011). Arab women are faced with additional challenges as their traditional social roles and invisibility within the public spheres of their cultures can easily mask contemporary detainment and disappearance. In Bahrain, a number of women protestors have disappeared or been seized by authorities. In Damascus activists reported that men and women were both afraid for women protestors’ safety. Such essentializing is exacerbated by the lack of a wide body of research on Arab women and their role in civil society, although there are notable exceptions (Al-Mughni & Tétreault, 2000; al-Ali, 2000; al-Ali, 2003; Ammar & Lababidy, 1999; Badran, 2001; Mernissi, 1992/2002; Rabo, 1997).

Bayat (2010) explains that under repressive regimes women may not be able to organize in the way the West looks for, but non-movement resistance goes on, particularly outside the public sphere and often unnoticed in Western press. While there was vast media coverage of the citizen activists and protesters in Tahrir Square, there was little to no attention to the efforts in communities across Cairo. For example, at the Organizers Forum in Cairo, held seven months after the fall of the Mubarek regime, Egyptian women activists reported citizen efforts that went nearly unknown in the West. Four days into the uprising, when the Mubarek regime was reported to having withdrawn police from the Square, it also withdrew police protection of every neighborhood in Cairo. Communities immediately organized *lagan shaabiyya* [popular committees] who served as volunteer neighborhood watch patrols (Brooks & Jaunzems, 2011). The *lagan shaabiyya* “offer an important opportunity to document the emergence of genuine collective action organizations at the local level in Egypt” (Bremer, 2011, para. 6). While many *lagan shaabiyya* “disbanded when order returned, others have drawn together to create new federations at the district, city, governorate, and national level. This development...holds tremendous promise for the emergence of genuine civil society activism in Egyptian localities” (Bremer, 2011, para. 7). The *lagan shaabiyya* used social media to organize and mobilize within their own communities, across communities, across Egypt, and to other activists outside the nation, most notably in Tunisia, where Tunisian activists advised those in Egypt based on their own experiences several weeks prior (Bremer, 2011).

Later stages of information flow

Returning to our framework for information flow, it is imperative to analyze how governmental power can get hold of rhetoric, reframe and erase to its needs. In the early stages of the Tunisian demonstrations women were clearly visible to the global audience. However, this

pattern is changing as the revolutions continue and women's issues conflict with views of the incoming regimes that support traditional women's roles. Cole and Cole (2011) explain:

But with such bold gestures go fears. As women look to the future, they worry that on the road to new, democratic parliamentary regimes, their rights will be discarded in favor of male constituencies, whether patriarchal liberals or Muslim fundamentalists. The collective memory of how women were in the forefront of the Algerian revolution for independence from France from 1954 to 1962, only to be relegated to the margins of politics thereafter, still weighs heavily.

At this point in the framework for information flow, the West receives and reframes the rhetoric espoused by the activists in its own terms. For example, more than a year after the removal of Mubarak from Egyptian rule, revolutions resulted in the election of a member of the Muslim Brotherhood as President, and his wife as the country's new "First Lady", which Naglaa Ali Mahmoud herself refuses to take as her title. Ms. Mahmoud herself is now a visible woman in the Arab World, and her own preferences appear to be to live the life of a traditional Muslim woman and wife. As reported in the *New York Times*, "But to some in the westernized elite, she stands for a backwardness and provincialism that they fear from the Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood" and goes on to explain that "Ms. Mahmoud, a homemaker, became an instructor in [The Brotherhood's] parallel women's auxiliary, [the Muslim Sisters] teaching young girls about marriage. 'Men are designed to lead and women to follow,' the group's curriculums explain." (El Sheikh & Kirkpatrick, 2012, June 27). A western feminist voice, one that is critical of Naglaa Ali Mahmoud's choices and opinions, is clear in this 'global' media coverage.

The impact of the Arab Spring revolutions on enhancing gender equality in the Middle East and North Africa has been challenged by multiple feminist scholars and activists, including Arab feminists (Bibars, cited in Bohn & Lynch, 2011, March 2; Brown, 2011, March 8; Fathi, 2011, June 12; Nazra for Feminist Studies, 2011, February 24; and Younis, 2011, March 9). To have a more nuanced understanding of the impact of the Arab Spring on Arab women, transnational and western feminist scholars must interrogate their role in contributing to essentialism and must enhance their awareness of the authenticity of local knowledge (Newsom, Cassara, & Lengel, 2011). Broad attempts to "empower" women as a monolithic category both essentializes and contains women, and fails to recognize social, cultural, and intellectual traditions and experiences of women outside of the dominant position. Failure to reach a global audience means failure to secure the aid of systemic power.

In historically patriarchal regions, values often do not match the values of global feminism, therefore the need for recognition of local values is particularly strong (Lengel, 1997; Newsom, Cassara, & Lengel, 2011; Newsom & Lengel, 2003). Western assumptions of Arab women's complicity have been critiqued by Arab feminist scholars for decades (Kandiyoti, 1988; Lengel, 1997; Lengel, 2004; Muslim Media Watch, 2010), and re-interpreted from local and post-colonial perspectives as using Western standards to interpret something that has to be understood from the Othered point of view (Abouzeid, 2008; Abu Lughod, 2001; Mohanty, 1986; Said, 1978). Activisms and women's movements are likewise disassociated from Western understandings.

Agreement on defining women's movements has been challenging. The UN World Summit on the Information Society (UN WSIS) Gender Caucus, for example, works hard to legitimize women in developing regions within the technology industry, by tying it to

traditional forms of women's work. However, one woman argues, "this reliance on the WSIS GC to speak on behalf of 'gender' is part of the problem perhaps." (Kee, 2005). The critique implies that the individual voices the Caucus seeks to represent in diverse local contexts may be easily lost in political rhetoric. In essence, civil society promotion precludes autonomy on the part of the people who are theoretically the beneficiaries since it "translates into the imposition of norms, values, or institutions that do not fit the ways in which a given civil society would like to imagine itself" (Challand, 2008, p. 399).

This can be seen in the role of women in the revolutions (Tansim, 2011). Both online and in the streets, Marzouki (2011) commended the "impressive visibility of women" in the Tunisian demonstrations and how the recent acts are situated in contrast to "stereotypes about the 'Arab street' that propagate the image of a male-dominated public space" (p. 37). Similarly, Khamis and Vaughn (2011) argue "social media's horizontal and non-hierarchical structure was empowering for women, who not only engaged in online activism and citizen journalism through social media, but also effectively and courageously participated in demonstrations and protests" (p. 12). Thus, these women of the revolutions were made visible on the larger global stage because of their use of social media, reflecting again the idea espoused by the BBC that social media changed the world.

Women's use of social media was not the only movement by women into men's spheres of influence. Reclaiming the public space were Mannoubia and Samia Bouazizi, the mother and sister, respectively, of Mohammed Bouazizi, whose self-immolation in the Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid triggered the protests throughout the nation (Labidi, 2011). April 6 Youth Movement activist Asmaa Mahfouz also positioned herself in the public sphere when, early on in the mobilization efforts in Egypt, she announced on her Facebook wall that she was headed to Tahrir Square and urged others to join her there to save Egypt (Tansim, 2011, February 21). Again, the actions of these women utilizing tools and space generally reserved for masculine norms brought them into global recognition, and in many ways equated them to Western feminist heroines and placed them in globally understood narratives.

The Outcome: Re-visioned Voices Transcend Containment

This analysis illustrates that Arab women's efforts in recent years have been most noticeable and globally recognized when they fit within global and Western narrative norms. Compare this to the global depiction of non-westernized Arab women, such as Egypt's Naglaa Ali Mahmoud, and we can see how Arab women's activism functions as a type of contained empowerment; localized power restricted by social norms yet flourishing in a space customized for and welcoming that power (Newsom, 2004). This functions within the current dynamic as the means by which global powers are attracted to and become involved in the situation. In the specific case of women's issues in the Middle East and North Africa, this means that local arguments are reconstituted to reach Western women. The power in these spaces is neither patriarchal nor completely removed from patriarchy, hence it is betwixt and between these potential states. While such contained empowerment provides the potential to generate new types and concepts of power transferable into hegemonic space, this power limited temporally, only capable of indirectly impacting hegemonic structures. Therefore it must be negotiated with formal, systemic power structures to gain recognition and acceptance as a form of agency.

The contained nature of women's voices is further complicated because Arab women seek spaces where they can be heard separately from the more mainstream understanding of feminism, as well as outside of patriarchal structures. Online, raised as calls for actions, Arab

women's voices resonate as powerful. However, agency in these online spaces is temporally situated in the sites and defined from and within the spaces themselves. This type of power is restricted to the gendered space created specifically for that type of power to operate. The agency inherent in social media may not translate offline. Therefore, these gendered online spaces are examples of contained empowerment: liminal sites where normative rules are suspended in favor of generating alternative norms.

The internet's key resource is information. The technology of the world wide web is an information-based technology. Cyberspace is built from information, and operates as a mechanism for transmitting information. Information and the value of information is often mediated by historically powerful entities, though social media can sometimes change that hierarchy. However, the metanarrative structures inherent in the social media act in much the same role as the gatekeepers of that historical power. While historically women have not been active as in the construction of the web as men, they have also not been viewed as the producers of meaning in web-spaces. However, feminists have determined it is possible to build identities online, masked in patriarchal characteristics so as to access power, that generate feminist ideals.

Ultimately, it is important to understand that for many repressed and isolated voices, social media are a primary way that needs and goals can be recognized to gain support from global institutions. There is a need to engage in more research on the role of women and their use of online social networking in and since the Arab Spring. Activist efforts toward social change in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere in the region will continue, and the role of social media in these processes is still unfolding. Still unfolding, too, is the distinctive nature of the governance structures that will emerge from the revolutions and how social media will continue to enhance the building of civil society.

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