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The American University in Cairo
School of Humanities and Social Sciences

Categorizing Women: Gender & Social Media During the 2011 Egyptian Revolution

A Thesis Submitted to
The Department of Sociology, Anthropology, Psychology, and Egyptology

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

In Sociology- Anthropology

By **S.W. Barnes**

Under the supervision of **Dr. Mark Westmoreland**

September 2012

DEDICATION

For my Opa & Oma

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ABSTRACT

The American University in Cairo * Categorizing Women: Gender & Social Media during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution* S.W. Barnes □

From February 2011 to July 2012, formerly suppressed political parties struggled to fill the political void post-Hosni Mubarak. While debates about Egypt's political future circulated, individuals as well as dissident factions employed various interpretations of women and their roles to symbolically represent their varying ideologies. Despite the significance and economic value women produce as citizens, many political actors regularly bracket their concerns as irrelevant to the affairs of the state. As a result, political actors have engaged with new strategic techniques to access the various politicized publics that marginalized subaltern groups. The most publicized approach during this time, involved individual's employment of social media, where political actors could not only escape state media's control over information, but also produce their own level of citizen authority. By ethnographically exploring social networking forums and engaging with Cairene political actors, this research argues that a dialectical relationship exists between social media and politicized publics where actors repurpose, and challenge concepts about women to alter the political atmosphere during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. Using participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and discourse analysis, this research explores how the analytical category of women was contested in social media and to what extent these classifications were manifested in publics found on- and offline. In order to understand the shifting political spheres during the Egyptian revolution, this ethnographic study engages with the symbolic deployment of women as a category, and the relationship between the production of women and publics. Participants of this research were selected amongst a systematic random sampling framework via Twitter; using prevalent hash tags that engaged with discourses about Egyptian women, the 2011 Egyptian revolution, future governance, and cyber activism. Key events served as a methodological frame to constitute case studies. The events were derived from interviews in which, participants defined what they believed to be moments of significance. This research contributes to the literature regarding the effect new communication technologies have on social structures by investigating the implication that genders has online. This is important because the ways women are marked, categorized, and circulated, consequently contribute to shaping future governance and sociopolitical apparatuses.

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I. INTRODUCTION

“I apologize for those who don’t take this as a joke; I just thought it was a funny picture; no disrespect meant. I am sorry. Assef!” @NaguibSawiris

Late June 2011, Coptic Christian and telecom businessman Naguib Sawiris posted a picture of Disney characters in Islamic garb on his Twitter account. In the photo (figure 1) Mickey Mouse’s eyes are threatening and framed by a rough cut-and-paste job of a thick black beard (an alteration of the original image) and Palestinian kufiya; Minnie’s eyes appear small and emotionless as they dully gaze through her black niqab. Al Arabiya News reported on June 28th that the picture was circulated weeks earlier with the slogan “This is the future of Egypt”. This not only reflected uneasiness about the shift in the political field from anti-Islamist’s political actors and campaigns, but also continues to problematize the way gender roles are conceptualized in association with Islam and the Middle East.



Figure 1.1
“Islamic Mickey and Minnie
Mouse” Picture taken from
[http://www.bergreport.com/05-
world/20110629.asp](http://www.bergreport.com/05-world/20110629.asp)
Accessed October 23, 2011.

“This is the future of Egypt,” slogan referenced the political vacuum post-Hosni Mubarak. This vacuum transpired when demonstrators overthrew Mubarak from power after years of living under emergency law, poverty, and corruption. After several weeks of violent episodes and unwavering demonstrations, Mubarak resigned from office on February 11, 2011.

While political uncertainties intensified, individuals used various types of public spaces to project and debate political awareness, ideologies, gender roles, and practices of

governance. By examining the different publics within Egypt- including those found online- this research investigates how various political actors use the conceptual category of women to influence political discourse. I argue that a dialectical relationship exists between publics found on- and offline where images and discourses about women continuously reshape and define gender roles as well as gesture to dominant sociopolitical practices during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution.

In the case of the above Mickey and Minnie Mouse example, the unknown producer used clothing as a marker of gender and religious association, and combined it with unseemly facial expressions to insinuate that an Islamist victory would alter the socio-religious structure of Egypt in undesirable ways. While it is presumptuous to suggest that the producer is non-Muslim or a proponent of separating religion and state, it is certain that this political actor understands and aims to represent Islamist governance as unfavorable due to stated and unstated assumptions of what an Islamist country would encompass. For this particular actor mandatory veiling is just part of the equation. The above image not only conveys Islamism as an adverse political dogma, but also perpetuates Orientalist stereotypes of women being passive and oppressed victims in need of being saved. This is especially pronounced as Minnie is shown in relation to her intimidating counterpart, Mickey.

The scandal concerning Sawiris' repost of the altered Disney characters received significant attention partly because of his fame as a Coptic Christian businessman, but also because of his advocacy of secularism as the founder of the liberal political party *Al-*

Masryeen Al-Ahrar (Free Egyptian's Party or FEP). A controversial term in Egyptian public discourse, secularism attracted media scrutiny when political analysts speculated the potential outcomes of revolting Middle Eastern nations. Secularism is an ideology that religion and religious bodies should have no influence in the political affairs of society; the rejection of favoring one religious affiliation over another in public spheres (Tarhan 2011). Despite the many interpretations that are attached to this term, secularization in Middle Eastern countries is generally regarded as a byproduct of colonization. For this reason it is often considered a tool used to strip or westernize the cultural or religious identity of a non-Western society (Çinar 2005). Thus, Sawiris' political beliefs and his repost of the Islamic Mickey and Minnie Mouse, infer that Islamism as a form of governance is unfavorable, a particular configuration that many political activists seek to discredit.

Recently, scholarship has focused on state's acknowledgment of cultural and religious identity, and their reaction toward visually expressive religious and ethnic differences, for instance, Muslim dress practices (Bullock 2002, Bowen 2007, Tarlo 2010). As a consequence, bodies and clothing become not only public markers, but also sites of contestation in which religion, nationalism and various other ideologies are performed and challenged. Ironically, normalization of symbols by institutions and different avenues of media, help sustain various stereotypes (Tarlo 2010). As is the case with the aforementioned image, the producer used social media to recreate Islamic Mickey and Minnie Mouse in a trite representation that homogenizes the movement and political ideology of Islamism. By dispersing the image within the confines of the Internet, the

producer had easier access and greater resources to transform Mickey and Minnie into a representation that vilifies Islamism, as well as had the privilege to stay mostly anonymous in a sphere where ideas and opinions are easily contested.

Despite the producer's attempt to convey Islamism as monolithic and regressive, the movement has various meanings attached to it. As Tarek Osman surmised in his book, *Egypt on the Brink: From Nasser to Mubarak*, Islamism can be understood as:

“an alternative social provider to the poor masses; an angry platform for the disillusioned young; a loud trumpet-call announcing ‘a return to the pure religion’ to those seeking identity, a ‘progressive, moderate religious platform’ for the affluent and liberal; an increasingly civic interlocutor with Egyptians Christians and the West- and at the extremes, a violent vehicle for rejectionists and radicals” (2010:111).

Indeed, there are various parties that are categorized under the movement of Islamism. The Muslim Brotherhood (MB), for example, managed to fulfill many duties that the former regime was unable to provide due to macro-economic burdens and its politico-economic orientation and class commitments (Osman 2010). After being exiled and imprisoned, the Muslim Brotherhood's reemergence was supported by many Egyptians in poor and rural areas, who received benefits from the MB's social services. Social services provided by the party included transportation, affordable healthcare, food distribution, education, and other humanitarian activities. In addition, their political reforms sought to increase political freedom and advocated for fair elections (Osman 2010).

Nonetheless, despite the divergent Islamist factions, Egyptian's uneasiness about their authorized participation has not been unwarranted¹. Egypt endured two decades of struggle between Nasser's regime and groups seeking to overthrow it to inspire a socio-religious revolution (Osman 2010:95). *Al-Jamaa Al-Islamia* (the Islamic Group) was established in the mid 1970's and was Egypt's largest militant group for the next twenty years, as well as the key perpetrator of a large number of attacks in Egypt (Ibid:95). The Egyptian Islamic Jihad also contributed to the violence that Egypt witnessed from the mid 1970's-1990s. During this time Islamists carried out more than 700 attacks against various institutions and officials (Ibid:97). Between 1982 and 2000, more than 2,000 Egyptians died in terror attacks, including parliament members and secular writers (Ibid:97).

The rise of Islamist activity also created a shift in socially preferred patterns of gender roles. After the revolution in 1952, with the Egyptian monarchy dismantled and King Farouk exiled, veiling and other visually expressive idioms disappeared from the urban landscape, abandoned mostly by the upper and middle classes in Cairo (Ahmed 1992:216). When Nasser implemented socialist reforms that proclaimed women as equal citizens and working partners to men, veiling in particular became scarce (Ibid:216). In contrast, with Egypt's defeat from Israel in 1967, Islamic movements began to increase. Ahmed surmises that some interpreters associated Egypt's defeat with the claim that God abandoned Egypt because Egyptians had abandoned God (Ibid:216). Yet, a more tangible

¹ Many sociopolitical groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood were unable to successfully stage political campaigns due to coercion from the regime. Under Hosni Mubarak's rule, any political challenge was suppressed by beatings, torture and arrests (Osman 2010).

outcome of Egypt's loss against Israel can be measured with the diminishing faith in Nasser's socialist program, which ultimately ended in failure. After Nasser's death, Islamist influence spread, along with their rhetoric and emblems of Islamic dress. Even President Anwar El Sadat used religious speech to gain support and legitimacy, "declaring himself committed to a state based on the twin pillars of Iman (faith) and 'Ilm (science)" (Ibid:217).

Moreover, external political affairs may have had an impact on the increase in Islamist activity in several ways. Firstly, the effects of neoliberal policies under Sadat and Mubarak increased marginalization of many sectors in society, causing recourse to Islamist ideologies and practices to become more prevalent (Osman 2010). Secondly, increased migration between the Gulf and Egypt led to an increased exposure to Wahhabi practices, which also reshaped beliefs, norms, practices, and ideas (Ibid). Finally, informal reports suggest that rentier countries such as Saudi Arabia and Libya financially persuaded various parties to promote Islamic dress practices as well as the adoption of ritualized Islamic codes of conduct. These groups in turn, would offer money to individuals for their affiliation, endorsement, and adornment of Islamic garbs (Williams 1979:53).

With Islamic dress practices more visible and perhaps more widespread amongst women, Osman states that degrees of Islamic activity can be measured by the increase of the proportion of women in Egypt wearing the veil, which rose from less than 30 percent to more than 65 percent in two decades; by early 1990's the veil was informally established

as the dress code for Muslim women, rather than an occasional choice (Osman 2010:80). In this context, Osman argues that there was a return to emphasizing men's public roles and women's domesticity (Ibid:80). This sentiment emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s when political actors such as Sheikh Al-Sharaawi emphasized women's return to their rightful kingdom- the home (Haddad & Esposito 1998), thereby relegating women within a private/public divide. This divide continues to have an important impact on the way women, their statuses and roles, are conceptualized in society.

Despite the interpretations of Islamism and women's roles within that ideology, the Middle East is a heterogeneous region where politics and religion converge in various processes. Mass media as well as political actors and organizations continuously conjecture specific types of women as being archetypal for their respective ideologies. For instance, the animated depiction illustrated a *fully veiled* Minnie Mouse (woman), as being an icon for Islamism. This example is problematic and disconcerting inasmuch various Islamic precepts and applications of Islam exist within overlapping public spheres and yet, the example limits Minnie to not only her clothing, but also her religious association and gender. With these distinguishing markers, she is placed in a context where her wellbeing is questioned by the ominous presence of the male Islamist (Mickey). Thus, discussing how categories of women affect Egypt's political atmosphere during the Egyptian revolution remains incomplete if we do not discuss the divergent public spaces (online and offline) in which a multiplicity of variables contributes to the discourses about women.

As we move forward, the reader may well recognize an underlying contention the participants of this study have with the rise of Islamist activity and their own regard of how Islamists interpret religion, gender, and good governance. In part, it can be said that the participants' interpretations are drawn from religious and cultural norms that govern women's statuses, political praxis, and other aspects of their lives. In view of this, it has largely been assumed that all Middle Eastern Muslim families are patriarchal by nature and Muslim family laws reinforce and control gender relations, subordinating women's status and importance in the family (Moghadam 2003:113). It should be noted, however, that patriarchy is not bound to any specific religion or region, but rather should be understood within the "social-structural and development terms" of a society (Ibid: 123). Islam, like any religion, like any social construct for that matter, is experienced, practiced, and interpreted differently over time and space and hence is inseparable from the cultural and historical context in which it exists.

Nevertheless, some of this underlying contention that the participants feel is related to the current internal structures of Egypt, which are indeed embedded with patriarchal values of kinship, clan, and religion (Ibid: 130). As a consequence, discourses about women and their positions are often framed in modernizing, religious, moral and state-building projects. Thus, for the purpose of this research I use women abstractly to refer to the categories of women set forth in Egypt's cultural and religious representations. These cultural representations of women are often influenced by laws and reflect the significance of gender in state formation and ideologies, as well as signal the agendas of political actors who produce and propagate these representations (Moghadam 2003). The

term political actor refers to individuals (men and women) who employ user-generated content -material produced and disseminated in public spheres- to participate in an ongoing communicative network to develop, challenge, negotiate, and (re)construct these debated attitudes about women. To convey the categorical significance of women, the following section examines literature on gender production, the deployment of women as symbols, and the potentials of cyber activism. These three bodies of literature interpenetrate to help me investigate the effects communication technologies and gender configurations have on one another and question the extent to which this interrelation impacted Egypt's social conventions.

Literature Review

I review scholarship on gender production to understand how gender constructions shape the identity of individuals, and their enactment within society. Although contemporary scholars conclude that gender identity is a performance and not biologically determinable, regulatory powers maintain and produce gender constructions. These powers, however, remain influx as different types of authorities attempt to change the social order of things. In this context, power is not judicial, economical, or liberal but is created within discourses of knowledge and 'truth'. Thus, like gender, power is produced and utilized in different ways by different entities to fulfill specific agendas.

The production of a male/female binary often dictates the terms of gender, roles, statuses, and for the purpose of this study, account for the social construction of women. Symbolic

significance is attached to these analytical categories of man and woman by various entities, and thus become a rich social universe of different meanings.

The symbolic significance of a woman is important because it is typically located within a range of stereotypical representations. For example, nationalist actors personified Egypt as a woman so that a man could protect and love *his* country (Baron 2005). This metaphor fits neatly into the patriarchal values of the country, in which men are seen as the providers and protectors of women and familial matters, and also reproduces the conventional male/female binary in which heterosexual relationships are normalized. Thus, the symbolic deployment of women in nationalism is reviewed to convey how women are used to represent ideologies, notwithstanding that the ideal type of woman changes throughout time and space. This section evaluates women as political icons, commonly employed as emblems to influence individual thought. Like the political actor that portrayed Mickey and Minnie Mouse in a certain light, political actors and state institutions insert women into sociopolitical categories to mobilize agendas to specific ends. These categories are frequently contested representations of women and gender relations, but typically operate as crucial structuring elements within most societies. As Sreberny has argued, “*representation* always carries its double meaning of both political process and of mediation” (2005:287).

Lastly, the review focuses on how communication has always been fundamental in facilitating the political agendas of political actors. Propaganda has planted new roots in communicative technologies as individuals and groups produce and distribute

information at an alarmingly accelerated speed. Thus, the third dimension of literature discusses communicative technologies and questions the degree of its importance. Social media as a type of communicative technology give individuals the possibility to engage with one another to discuss, negotiate, and challenge various topics. Moreover, it has created an increased sense of accountability in shaping the sociopolitical landscape and yet, the symbolic deployment of women in social media as conceptual tool, is often overlooked. These intersecting bodies of literature will help us understand how we can start to evaluate the symbolic significance of women in social media during the Egyptian revolution.

Gender Production

So what makes a woman, a woman? Is there a common universality that unites all women? Do women share a bond by virtue of oppression? Or in the words of Simone de Beauvoir, does one become a woman? In truth, the concept of woman is no longer understood as a stable and enduring subject. Cultural understandings of women vary through space and time. Consequently, these fluid interpretations determine the status of women within different societies (Moore 1988). In order to understand the social construction of women, the historical production of gender must be reviewed.

The terms gender and sex became distinguishable in Simone de Beauvoir's "*The Second Sex*," when she challenged assumptions of biological determinism. Her main argument maintained that 'femininity' is socially constructed. This produced a theory in which sex

indicated biological differences, while gender signified socially constructed characteristics (de Beauvoir 1972:295). This distinction meant that gender could be theorized as a cultural interpretation of sex and thus, had the capability to change (McDowell 2003).

A shift in scholarship, however, conveyed that these two processes were interrelated and therefore inseparable. Gayle Rubin in her influential article, "*The traffic in women: notes on the political economy of sex*," argued that sex and gender are, "sets of arrangements by which society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied" (1975:159). In this transformation, sex becomes gender, through dress, performance and other gender markers. Thus, gender as a constructed knowledge, only establishes meanings for interpreting bodily differences (Scott 1988:2). These interpretations are context-dependent and don't always fit comfortably within the system of "compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality" (Butler 2010:22). This wave of thinking challenged the sex/gender divide and the assumption that sexual differences were universally applicable.

By the late 1980's early 90's, post-colonial critics such as Gayatri Spivak (1998) and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991) forced women to rethink their female subject in order to understand the difficulties of class, racial, religious, and ethnic identities; writing from their particular positions as a particular type of woman, not as "woman" (McDowell 2003:22). The multiple variables that altered the homogenous concept of woman

influenced many feminist scholars (Vron Ware 1992, Frankenberg 1993) to re-theorize the subject as being conditional.

The subject then, is inconstant and an amenable entity that is continuously in the process of becoming. As a construction, gender is maintained by daily actions through processes of knowledge (Foucault 1982). In other words, the value of knowledge about the subject circulates and functions in relation to its power production (Ibid:781). This form of power categorizes subjects in everyday life, creating an identity that is prescribed by conscience and self-knowledge (Ibid:781). The practices of power, however, is not merely a relationship between individuals or a collective, but “it is a way in which certain actions modify others” (Ibid:788). Power, like gender, only exists when it is actively performed.

Performances, or rather performativity of gender is a theoretical framework developed by Judith Butler in her influential work entitled, “*Gender Trouble*.” According to Butler, the subject is a performative construct and “doing” one’s identity has the capability to disrupt the male/female binary that has prevailed. Like Foucault, Butler does not find gender to be a natural fact, but something that is produced. Its appearance of normalcy is only so because it is shadowed by the constrictive power structures in which it is located. Consequently, the terms sex and gender are often rooted within and the result of discourses and law. These laws produce “natural” sexed and gendered identities so that subjects can be made to abide by them (Butler 2010:77).

So why do bodies matter? Are they social scripts of performances? Individual's performative practices of daily life reproduce a society's view on how men and women should behave (Lorber 1994:5). Through social interaction, individuals learn and act in the expected ways that are constructed by the knowledge of gender. These social arrangements can be justified by religion and are usually upheld by the law and social norms. What it means to be a woman or man is therefore, contingent, varied, and dependent on the gender boundaries of one's society. Women's behaviors and appearances in particular -constructed as they may be- are subject to the political agendas of movements, state rhetoric and revolutions. This is illustrated when specific types of women become paragons and are representative of encompassing certain values and characteristics. To illustrate this, the next section conveys how women are symbolically linked to the particular ideology of nationalism. By using specific types of women to become representative of personal beliefs, divergent political parties- inadvertently or not- convey that symbolically women carry important weight in the affairs of the state. It also shows that interpretations of womanly characteristics are divergent, plentiful, and used to oppose or support political convictions. Moreover, the assorted images of women are suggestive of how women's roles and gender boundaries shift over time and space. All of these nuances are vital in demonstrating the importance of women's impact on the political landscape, especially during a shift in governance.

Women as Symbols: Nationalism

Nations have frequently personified the image of their state in human form. The purpose of this iconography is to foster solidarity and give the concept of nationhood greater immediacy (Baron 2005:57). This immediacy creates an 'imagined community' or a nation based on imagined camaraderie. Benedict Anderson, theorist of imagined communities, argues that the nation is not imagined because it is false, but because:

“the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion...it is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much as to kill, as willing to die for such limited imaginings” (Anderson 1991: 6-7).

Anderson equates the nation to an imagined community because it is impossible for all the citizens of a nation-state to become acquainted with one another. Moreover, the symbolic significance or conceptualization of the nation is a tie that creates comradeship. In response to this, Partha Chatterjee (1993) challenged Anderson's theory by reasoning that the imaginations of political communities have been limited by European colonialism. In other words, when previously colonized nations gained their independence they adapted the political techniques of the colonizers to emanate and compete within Western notions of modernity. These techniques included mirroring their sociopolitical paradigms as well as their ideological strategies. Thus, Chatterjee argues that “even our imaginations, must remain forever colonized” (1993:5).

In “*Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics*,” Beth Baron surmises that the ideology nationalism, like the idea of personifying Egypt as a woman, may be such a concept that was adapted from European colonizers² (Barons 2005:57). Although nationalists could have easily used a masculine noun such as homeland (*al-watan*), Baron’s observes that the nouns Egypt (*Misr*) and the Egyptian nation (*al-umma al-Misriyya*) are both feminine.

For example, nationalists in Egypt commonly operationalized the symbolic imagery of women to illuminate differences between the colonizer and the colonized. After the British occupation in 1882, Egyptian nationalism peaked and became focused on curbing European influence within Egypt. Baron concludes that nationalists in Egypt may have adapted women as an analytical device from European colonizers to illustrate cultural, social, political, and religious differences. As Al-Ali and Pratt state, “ ‘Our culture is different from yours’ often translates into ‘Our women are different from yours’ ” (2009:167). In this context, women were often used as symbols of the nation, markers of cultural authenticity, or as signifiers to craft national identities in order to facilitate political and economic agendas (Charrad 2011).

The theme of women as symbols of the nation developed under a metaphor that relied heavily on women being the mothers of the nation (Baron 2005, Pollard 2005, Botman 1999, Mundy 1995, Najmabadi 2005). According to Baron, representing the nation as a

² Baron specifically links notions of women and nationalism from the French republican precedent Marianne. For further reading see Maurice Agulhon, *Marianne into Battle: Republican Imagery and Symbolism in France, 1789-1880*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge, 1981).

woman was a tool that attracted an assumed male audience. As a neo- patriarchal society, Egypt's social and cultural values aroused early artists into creating nationalist iconography that invoked men to feel protective of their country. Artists constructed this binary so that a man could love his nation: the man the lover and the woman the beloved (Baron 2005:78).

Because of the various sociopolitical histories in most Middle Eastern countries, practices located within colonialism, nationalism, independence, and neo-liberalism, have left a mark on the relationship between the state and the social production of gender (Charrad 2011:422). Nevertheless, portrayals of the “female Egypt” are diverse. These representations include peasant women, Pharaonic queens, pious Islamic women, and the cosmopolitan “new women” which represents contemporary Egypt. Baron argues:

“the multiplicity of images reflects the struggle for power on behalf of different parties and their debates over Egyptian culture. The contrasting images of this period also show the fluidity of women's roles and blurring gender boundaries rather than a timeless perception of Egyptian womanhood. In short, if Egyptians agreed that the nation was to be represented as a woman, they disagreed as to which ‘woman’ should be chosen and what being a ‘woman’ meant” (Baron 2005:81).

Indeed, the women as a category, not only speaks to gender and sex constructions, but is also engaged in an ongoing conversation with ethnicity, class, religion, and age. The multiple variables that classify women also create multiple representations, which divergent political ideologies can reference. For example, Baron discusses three photos that appear in the journal *al-Lata' if al-Musawwara* on April 8th, 1919 (Baron 2005:127). These images include veiled women proudly waving the Egyptian flag while riding in

carriages driven by working class men. Although the images were taken in April to celebrate the release of detainees from Malta, the photos were reused in a print referencing a women's anti-colonialist demonstration in March 1919. This indicates that the editors as political actors intentionally used these images outside their original context in order to create an imagined vision of national solidarity against foreign powers. In this context, a woman performing politically is deemed acceptable.

This brief example illustrates that there is no archetypal Middle Eastern woman, but women who are inserted into sociopolitical categories by individual actors, institutions, and organizations (Moghadam 2003). With the increase in technological productivity in the 21st century, political actors have greater ease in manipulating, producing, and indexing their own symbols online to promote personal views and positions. At the core of these political discourses found on- and offline, women related issues carry significant weight in influencing new social constructions. Therefore, the technologies comprising of communicative practices, and the text and media found within them, are cultural artifacts that can be investigated in order to understand how individuals are negotiating their identities and how that challenges or supports conventional understandings of gender (Wilson & Peterson 2002). Within this context, user-generated content produced, distributed and used during the Egyptian revolution must be analyzed as part of the existing culture, rather than separate or a purely representational entity.

The literature that follows outlines the debate over Internet's effectiveness in producing changes in order to contextualize the extent in which discourses within social media

could influence and shape gender issues in politics. Whereas many argue that social media's impact on society is minimal due to the exclusivity of the Internet, others believe that it could effectively alter social configurations within society, if the Internet's full potential was wielded.

Social Media

In the last two decades, the expansion of computer-based networks enabled online interactions between individuals to produce new forms of communicative practices. These practices include creating exclusive publics within cyberspace that require membership, to constructing complex publics that include hundreds of simultaneous participants (Wilson & Peterson 2002). Despite the fact that technology has increasingly become embedded into daily life, until recently, anthropologists have positioned the Internet as peripheral to culture (Dickey 1997). However, using ethnographic approaches to investigate the emerging constructions of identities and symbols can reveal the sociopolitical implications of communicative technologies and therefore, should be analyzed with greater detail (DiMaggio 2001).

The Internet refers to a global infrastructure of interconnected computer networks, or in simpler terms a "networks of networks" (Uimonen 2001). It carries and creates communication-oriented technologies such as the World Wide Web, email, and social media sites that allow online interactions. Early literature regarding the Internet considered the new technology revolutionary due to its potential in transforming social

and political structures. Rheingold's work, *"The Virtual Community,"* predicted that the Internet would have the "capacity to challenge the existing political hierarchy's monopoly on powerful communications media, and perhaps thus revitalize citizen-based democracy" (1993:14).

In Egypt, this conjecture was seen when new and old political entities used social media to fight for legitimacy and authority, as well as challenge the state's, "hegemonic control over the flow of information" (Hofheinz 2005:78). Social media not only broadened the public sphere for divergent political actors to participate, but also reduced the costs of collective action (Rheingold 2003). In other words, tools like text messaging or tweeting allowed political actors to sidestep the surveillance of authoritarian regimes and increased the scope in which they were able to mobilize. Salmon, Fernandez, and Post echo this thought by regarding this type of activism as public-will mobilization or "a social force that can mobilize organically, or with external support and influence, to become a political lever for social change, and has the potential, if adequately resourced, organized, and mobilized, to serve as the impetus for social change" (2010:159).

However, Evgeny Morozov, author of *"The Net Delusion"* complicates the popular idea that social media engenders democracy and produces freedom. He asserts that "cyberutopians" or individuals who believe the Internet can be used for political emancipation, are overly optimistic. The core of his argument contends that the Internet, more often than not, constricts and destroys freedom. Aptly questioned, he asks, "What if the liberating potential of the Internet also contains the seeds of depoliticization and thus

dedemocratization?” (2011:59). In particular, this is a significant question to ask in authoritarian states where various publics are regularly under surveillance and freedoms of speech and expressions are controlled. In truth, SCAF’s own surveillance of social media led to the imprisonment of many political actors (Asmaa Mahfouz, Alaa Abd el Fattah, Wael Ghonim).

In addition, scholars have argued that communicative technologies have little effect on institutions or authoritative rule, and that the Internet plays a relatively unimportant role throughout the Middle East due to the limited access for the majority of citizens (Lynch 2005, Faris & Etling 2008). The limited availability hinders the Internet’s potentiality to influence political institutions and affairs in the Middle East (Lynch 2005:50). Even if more individuals had the opportunity to access networking sites, Malcolm Gladwell believes social media only increases the level of participation, which “lessens the level of motivation that participation requires” (2010:46).

This research however, is more concerned with understanding how the sociocultural practices within and outside mediated communications simultaneously create and mold each other (Brown & Duguid 2000, Garfinkel 2000). This approach views the Internet as “continuous with and embedded in other social spaces” that “happen within mundane social structures and relations that they may transform but that they cannot escape” (Miller & Slater 2000:5). This type of research forces us to investigate how individuals are socialized into communicative practices and how these practices are shaped by sociocultural conditions (Wilson & Peterson 2002). The various user-generated content

found within these social spaces must be analyzed in the terms of the sociopolitical practices of culture and the infrastructures that govern it. This research is an attempt to contribute to that effort.

In sum, the Internet fosters communicative qualities that have aided individuals in choosing the way they wish to participate by negotiating, reproducing, and indexing social conventions. During the 2011 Egyptian revolution, many used this space to engage with political discourses by raising public awareness, testing public opinion trends, rallying support for a political cause, triggering public mobilization, boosting civic engagement, and enabling citizen journalism (Khamis 2011:1164). Indeed, Global Voices (2011) reported that national and structural issues such as constitutional referendums were increasingly debated in blogs, newspapers and radio broadcasts, eliciting that changes in media encouraged individuals to create alternative publics to debate the authority of dominant sociocultural practices and norms. In that sense, although social media alone cannot bring about revolutions, it is a space where marginalized social groups like women can redefine and challenge the existing boundaries of social configurations found within Egypt's various publics (Skalli 2006). In the section that follows, I briefly outline the different types of theories found within subsequent chapters in order to contextualize my investigation of women in social media during the Egyptian revolution.

Theoretical Framework: Publics, Bodies, & Cyber-Activism

The notion of publics plays heavily throughout this research. A public can be defined in terms of individuals in general, as an assemblage of people bounded by an event, or in Jürgen Habermas' terms, as a self-organized congregation that comes into being only in relation to texts and its circulation. These slightly varying definitions of publics are not easily distinguishable but are useful in understanding the different ways the term can be employed and distinguished from the private sphere. The reader will find instances in which all denotations are used. The private sphere, however, refers only to one's particular civil post or position within the family (Cody 2011:40).

Discussing the various publics located within Egypt remains unclear if we don't account for the socio-historical context in which Egypt was formed. Egypt is a neo-patriarchal state, or in other words a product of modernity and tradition developed in the context of capitalism (Moghadam 2003:129). The term neo-patriarchy describes the macrostructures (society, economy, state affairs) and microstructures (family and individuals) of a nation-state (Sharabi 1988). Practices found within both macro- and microstructures reinforce normalized views of family and gender roles through law, education, media and public discourse. However, the control of women in relation to dominant powers -whether yielded individually or by institutions- is central to the reproduction of patriarchal practices. For example, kinship values are embedded in neo-patriarchal states in which state powers control various rights and practices through legal enforcement: family laws, laws pertaining to reproductive rights, abortions, abandonment, etc. This close-knit relationship between family and state illustrate a blurred division between the public and

the private. In this context, Egypt is embedded with patriarchal values that affect the inclusivity, character, and permeability of publics found within Cairo.

Thus, public theories are intermingled with the symbolic body, and cyber activism to investigate how women and discourses about women shape the political landscape in 2011 and 2012. By doing so, I contend that political actors engage in a “multiplicity of overlapping public spheres” that simultaneously affect and define one another (Eickelman & Salvatore 2002). The publics that are situated in Egypt extend to the online world as well as the offline. I situate the offline/online binary not as contrasting entities, but rather as part of a dialectical relationship that continuously shifts, defines, and continues the conversation about the boundaries of citizen and state authority, gender constructions, and various other social conventions. I agree with Castell’s network theory which dismantles distinctions between online and offline realities, due to the multiple identities and negotiated roles individuals have within various sociopolitical and cultural contexts (Wilson & Peterson 2002). They are distinguished only to provide greater ease in analyzing how people negotiate and use discourses about women to impact the Egyptian revolution.

In addition, this research analyzes how women’s bodies become political instruments. Symbolic references or interpretations associated with the body have a significant impact on an individual’s relationship with public spaces. For example, throughout my time in Egypt, I have come across foreign friends who will avoid certain areas of Cairo because their dress practices and mannerisms not only make them stand out, but also provoke

unwanted engagement with other people. In the same way that publics may affect someone's thoughts, comments, and concerns, bodies may affect the way individuals interact with their surroundings.

The most obvious signifier in identifying a body is through clothing and biological attributes, which is based on the gender configurations of a society. Although gender is often thought of in terms of biological characteristics, Butler's theory on performativity has been groundbreaking in understanding that gender is not a biological fact, but a series of repeated performances. For that reason, gender distinctions rest heavily on the quality of the body's performance (Reischer & Koo 2004). However, Butler's theory of gender performativity is a relatively recent approach to defining gender. Historically, ideologies have defined gender in terms of their positions and meanings within society (Reischer 2004:311). Ludmilla Jordanova, author of *"Natural facts: a historical perspective on science and sexuality,"* argued that social constructions of gender typically rely on bodily attributes to refer to body-based "natural facts" in order to support their world view (1980). But these "natural facts" or "natural symbols" derived from the body actually "produce and are part of ideological systems; they disguise and justify the social artifice as a natural part of the unchangeable 'order of things'" (Devisch 1985:409).

In other words, gendered norms ascribe roles and characteristics to men and women through customs of law and cultural understandings of feminine and masculine (Moghadam 2003:2). 'Sexual division of labor' is a term used by Marxist feminists (George 2005, McRobbie 2002, Pratt 2004) to refer to the ideological ordering of roles,

rights, and values in private and public spheres. Gender as a social formation, is a “system of social stratification, and an institution that structures every aspect of our lives because of its embeddedness in the family, the workplace, and the state, as well as in sexuality, language, and culture” (Lorber 1994).

Thus, the production of the male/female binary is primarily dictated by the social and cultural terms of a society. In Egypt these terms are bound and located within the patriarchal values of kinship and family. The symbolic significance that each gender carries, varies within differing publics and frequently become representative of political campaigns, ideologies, and debates.

As a result, gender identity is at the very heart of formulating public spaces. It is used by political actors to exclude or devalue some bodies, practices, and discourses from participating in political dialogues. As a process of performances, gender creates social differences that distinguish between a ‘man’ and a ‘woman’ (Lorber 1994). Throughout daily life, individuals learn what is expected from them and what type of behavioral patterns they can and cannot employ. Thus, normative patterns of behavior simultaneously construct and maintain the gendered order of things. These gendered norms are enforced by informal sanctions of gender-appropriate behavior by peers and formal punishment from dominating authorities (Ibid). Thus, forceful exclusion from publics is frequently imposed when individuals are not performing aspects of their identity ‘correctly’.

However members of a social group don't merely replicate in mindless repetition of what was performed before. Although individuals generally produce gender based on normative behavioral patterns, gender is a process by which there is space for adjustment and variation by individuals, small groups, and institutionalized change (Scott 1988:7). Thus, discourses around gender and access to public spaces become more substantial and contested as individuals contribute to these dialogues through communicative technology. Communicative technology is beneficial in that it increases the scope of participation and sidesteps the regulation of gender configurations imposed offline due to the Internet's capability to admit anonymous identities. By participating in social media, political actors are not only influencing the political affairs within Egypt, but also negotiating authority and challenging naturalized social and cultural configurations.

Although online spaces are not free of social constructions, individuals have greater ease developing beyond the societal roles by drawing on multiple gender facets and challenging conventional boundaries. Anonymity or screened identities allow political actors to dispute these conventions as well as participate in publics not entirely monitored by the state and other social actors. In addition, the arrangement of social media not only produces more resources to create images and symbolic representations, but also facilitates and manipulates communicative discourses through political agency, allowing greater freedom in concealing or producing an imagined self. This technology produces forums in which citizen's participation has the capability to penetrate and mold boundaries typically guarded by dominant sociocultural practices. This is particularly true if we trace how women negotiate their symbolic significance in online and offline sites.

Therefore, I argue that social media is a tool that political actors use to access conventionally exclusive publics in order to debate and challenge social constructions and politics. In other words, not only do discourses about women and women themselves actively mold and shape public affairs, but political activities also reshape and define the terms and roles of women. By doing so, this research confirms that a dialectical relationship exists between offline and online publics and is part of the existing power relations of every day life. Thus, user-generated content found within the online sphere should be analyzed as another type of social artifact and alternative source of authority. Future theoretical frameworks dealing with gender and social change, should take a careful consideration of communicative technologies and their political qualities and capabilities in mobilizing ideologies and operating as a site for (re)assembling social constructions. In the following sections, I explain how I selected the participants of this study from the social media site of Twitter, summarize this research, and outline the chapters to come.

Methodology: Ethnographic Approaches

In order to investigate my research question I used two different methods to select key participants. In the first method I selected five individuals from a systematic random sampling technique via Twitter. Through this method I predominately engaged with discourses about Egyptian women, the 2011 Egyptian revolution, future governance, and cyber activism. By typing in key words such as ‘#Egywomen (Egyptian women),’ ‘#IWD (International Women’s Day),’ ‘#SCAF (Supreme Council of Armed Forces),’ ‘#Tahrir,

‘#Jan 25’, and ‘#Egypt’, I developed a list of 100 user names from Twitter and contacted every fourth person. The first five participants that responded constituted the ethnographic data of this research. I chose this methodology, because political actors that use Twitter demonstrate their familiarity and conscious decision to consume and produce alternative media. This allowed me to investigate how political actors exercise this avenue for social activism and examine how or if that materialized in publics found offline.

The second mode of selection was accomplished by respondent-driven sampling, or sampling that relied on a current participants’ knowledge of additional individuals willing to partake in this study (Bernard 2006:193). Although Cairo’s population is vast, the purpose of this method was to become better acquainted with individuals that are involved in political affairs, but may not be continuously involved with social media forums. This had the possibility of negating my argument, but it was important to understand social media’s degree of impact according to individuals who are more politically active offline.

To collect my data I focused on key events as a methodological frame to constitute case studies. These choice events were derived from interviews in which participants defined what they believed to be moments of significance for women in social media or held a social media aspect to it. Semi-structured interviews were used to elicit the participants’ points of view about women, the Egyptian revolution and good governance through open-ended questions. This permitted participants the freedom to talk about related

subjects that resulted in future respondents and information. Using this approach guided my research to understand how political actors rationalized specific ideologies and how that translated into their beliefs about women's roles.

By engaging in events that are attended by women and/or for women, I observed how political actor's deployed symbols and speech in order to create political consciousness. Participant observation at these public events (lectures, charitable events, sermons, festivals, etc.) allowed me to analyze how participant's statements in the offline sphere translated into the online sphere in terms of action and rhetoric. This method was particularly beneficial because it demonstrated the degree of influence political actors had in molding and transforming the politics in Egypt.

Finally, I use discourse analysis to understand how participants rationalize their understanding of activism and how that interpretation influences their political participation. As Hannerz states, "Interpretation is an active engagement with media content, which may lead to further action" (1998:244). As such, political actors interpretation of different forms of activism may gesture to how they rationalize their own political subjectivity.

In addition, I investigate the language employed in on- and offline publics in order to illustrate how social configurations are not just merely internalized, but are continuously debated and challenged. Discourse analysis specifically pays attention to the language used in social contexts (Farnell & Graham 1998). Typically, discourse centered methods

are used in participant observation, however, I adapt this method and analyze the “utterances that occur in the context of social interaction” via social networking forums (Ibid 411). This method is beneficial because it situates social media as part of the many publics found within Egypt that has the capability to create a space for dialogue and transform the sociopolitical landscape through political consciousness and awareness.

Conclusion

While women have frequently been at the forefront of scholarship in Middle Eastern studies, the topic has rarely been reviewed in conjunction with social media and revolutions. This is most likely due to the unpredictability of revolutions, but also because of the fluidity of communicative technologies, and the complex intricacies that constitute the Internet. Like Morozov, I resist the popular notion that technological pressures can create democracy in authoritarian societies; however also like Morozov, I maintain that the Internet “penetrates and reshapes all walks of political life, not just the ones conducive to democratization” (Morozov 2011:xiv). Thus, political actors’ use of social media is important because it serves as an avenue where individuals can exercise their numerous identities as well as express their agency in the shadows of state authority. Moreover, discourses and images found and circulated within social media sites can be examined as social artifacts in which individual’s agency mediate terms of participation and authority between state and society. Thus, a gender lens is applied to Egypt’s political scene to raise awareness around inequality, representation, activism, and the blurring of boundaries of the public and private during the 2011 revolution. And a

communication lens is applied to gender to reveal that sociocultural configurations can be found and fought within cyberspace due its embeddedness in sociopolitical conventions. These combined variables will illustrate how the boundaries between on- and offline are increasingly becoming blurred.

Scholarly Contributions

Having lived and studied in Egypt for the past three years, I had the opportunity to witness the Egyptian revolution from its conception until the inauguration of President Mohammed Morsi. During this time, I was stimulated by the growing debates that either praised social media for bringing about the so-called Arab Spring, or disregarded it as an ineffectual tool that had no real impact on society. With my curiosity aroused, I wanted to illustrate that while it is important not to overestimate the Internet's capabilities, it is equally as important not to de-emphasize its power to influence social and political conventions. The nexus of these two points led me to believe that online and offline worlds weren't distinct or opposing forces, but were part of a mutual conversation that simultaneously affected the political landscape.

I discovered that the tools employed, and the images and rhetoric found throughout the Egyptian revolution complicated the assumption that publics found on- and offline are distinct units that are incapable of molding each other's constitutions. But exploring these spaces with traditional and virtual ethnographic methods was no easy feat. Between the exhausting jargon and acronyms circulating around computer-mediated communication

and the infinite amount of content found online, I was tempted at times to give up completely and smash my computer against a wall.

But this would have been the wrong course of action and a gloomy way to interact with anthropology's relatively new approach in engaging with the Internet and communicative technologies. Part of my frustration during the undertaking of this research came from the relatively uncharted territory of the Internet with all its complex and intertwined forces, as well as the ambiguity of setting the parameters for an ethnographic site. However, rather than investigating how individuals interacted with a specific social networking forum, I chose to follow the participants' lead to constitute the data and material found within this research. I found this beneficial in that it developed a nuanced understanding of the fluid relationships between online and offline cultural life.

In particular, I wanted to understand how the conceptual category of women was used in both spaces to impact the political landscape. I chose women specifically because as a woman, I believe that we are often used as structuring elements to set the tone of how women's values, roles, and citizenship are perceived in society. My exasperation with this is due to my general observations that within most societies men typically fill leadership and policy-making positions. For example, in my homeland the United States, both President Barak Obama and current Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney, use women's reproductive rights and access to women's health care as methods to mobilize their agendas to specific ends and gain public support. Of course these campaigns become more complicated as we realize that their promises for an improved

life will only occur for particular types of women. Consequently, each campaign produces very different types of social realities for women overall, by individuals who don't understand what it means to be *produced as a woman*.

In a similar vein, the concept of women or how Egyptian women should perform their gender identity has been used throughout the Egyptian revolution to mobilize various political campaigns, and define women's statuses, roles, and importance in Egypt. While women do not participate in the public life to the same extent as men due to dominating sociopolitical practices that either exclude or bar their access, this research will demonstrate that Egyptian women are important in politics for various reasons. This importance can be traced and even produced within the contours of the web. Accordingly, this research aims to contribute to scholarship that believes the increased use of communicative technology has created considerable changes to the tone and content of daily life.

Therefore, in the chapter that follows, I have compiled a chronology of major events concerning women during the Egyptian revolution. These events were either mentioned briefly by participants or received considerable attention online by the initial collection of Twitter users from my methodological approach. These collected incidents frame my ethnographic journey as well as provide a brief glimpse of women's influences (as individuals and as a conceptual tool) on the political landscape during the Egyptian revolution.

After the recounted events, I briefly introduce the participants of this study. Their narratives reveal insight on online and offline activism as well as give context to why some events concerning women reached more media attention than others. This can help us understand how body, presentation, and sociocultural practices interpenetrate to mark out various forms of publics found within Egypt. Public theories are then investigated, in order to discover and test the malleability of boundaries put in place by the sociocultural practices found within Egypt's neo-patriarchal state.

In chapter three and four, the participants convey what it means to be an activist and dictates why social media is important in affecting the political atmosphere. Through their narratives and reflections they illustrate the different types of political participation found within Egypt. In their understanding of why social media impacts politics they focus on four major events that use the symbolic deployment of women. These events either transpired offline and were redistributed online to create political consciousness and awareness, or were intentionally produced online to contribute to the political dialogue during the Egyptian Revolution. In my concluding chapter, I explain why these dynamics are important for future research and why anthropologists should take a more nuanced look at dialogues and discourses found online.

II. POLITICS & PUBLICS

“Women’s visibility, women’s mobility, and women’s voices are central in shaping the boundaries of the public sphere.” - Nilüfer Göle

Politics

As a result of countrywide protests that deposed Hosni Mubarak on February 11, 2011, governing powers were transferred to the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF). Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, the herald of SCAF pledged to relinquish power in a period of six months. However, as time passed SCAF failed to honor their vows, unsuccessfully reassuring Egyptian citizens that power would be relinquished once parliamentary elections commenced in the fall of 2011. Disposed of the glorification that once encapsulated it, the Egyptian military was perceived by many citizens as reminiscent of Mubarak’s regime. SCAF waged violence against Egyptian citizens by enforcing physical violence, detentions, military trials, and new laws that strengthened the military’s grip on society at large.

In response, political actors sought new strategies to counter authoritative powers. Parties, initiatives, organizations, demonstrators, bloggers, and other individuals emerged within Egypt’s national public sphere in order to carve out a space for their voices. Women in particular faced challenges as they were frequently used symbolically to become representative of various political beliefs, but they themselves were barred from participating in affairs that had a direct effect on their status, roles and lives. In order to contextualize this ethnographic journey and give a sense as to what the political

atmosphere was like for women, I have compiled a chronology of significant events. These events were either referenced by the participants of this study or received considerable attention amongst the members of my Twitter community³. After I outline these moments of significance, I will also explain why each event is meaningful.

Chronology of Major Events: Women & the Revolution

Inspired by Tunisia's success in ousting President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali on January 14, 2011, Asmaa Mahfouz, an Egyptian activist posted a video on YouTube encouraging men and women to topple the Mubarak regime. In a matter of days the video went viral and rallied many to demonstrate. As a prominent member of Coalition of the Youth of the Revolution and one of the founders of the April 6 Youth Movement, her video campaign has been noted as a useful tool in sparking the national uprisings (NPR 2011). Her unique utilization of social media is important and significant for this research because it not only mobilized people, but also raised questions about social media's influence in shaping the sociopolitical landscape.

Soon thereafter, on January 28th 2011, state security forces and thugs assaulted pro-democracy protestors. On this particular day, a 23 year-old woman named Sally Magdy Zahran lost her life. Depiction of the young martyr created a stir when her unveiled picture was circulated throughout Egypt. Tensions increased when members from the Muslim Brotherhood defaced her photo with a blue felt-tipped pen on a wall in Tahrir

³ This community was based off of one hundred individuals I initially followed on Twitter in order to find key participants that would engage with this research.

Square devoted to martyrs of the revolution (Armbrust 2011). Rightly stated, Walter Armbrust observed, “Martyr images projected into discourse or public space implicitly demanded that anyone viewing them declare a position on what they signified. This is nowhere more clear than in the brief history of Sally Zahran” (Armbrust 2011:1). Despite controversial reports of where she was, how she died, if she adorned the hijab or not, she became a symbol and an iconic site of contention. Her photo is significant, because it compelled Egyptians to think about how they situate women and religion in society during the transpiration of new governance, and the possible construction of new and different societal configurations. Thus, Zahran’s image is only but a small gesture in which women affect political affairs. Even though the Egyptian revolution began in solidarity with the sole intent to remove Hosni Mubarak and his regime from power, it engendered societal issues surrounding gender, religion, class and ethnicity.

Celebrations erupted on February 11, 2011, marking the day Mubarak stepped down from power. On that evening, my friend and I made our way over to Tahrir Square to catch the final revelries. We lingered watching and listening to the concluding utterances of the night, when two young men stood next to us trying to catch our gaze. It was well past midnight and as a defense mechanism in any context when the hour is late, I avoided their eyes and whispered to my companion that we should probably relocate. Remaining on our heels one said, “Where you from?” His eyes dawdled on my friend and she glanced sideways at me. My friend is Dutch and has light ivory skin and chestnut hair. I on the other hand am a product of African American and Austrian parentage with West

Indian, Irish, Italian, and Black Foot Indian ancestry, which somehow produces the convenient effect of frequently being mistaken for Egyptian.

Barely looking at them, we answered quickly and candidly, excusing ourselves so we could leave; others were starting to look on. When my friend Abed appeared from around the corner, he saw the two young men behind us and grimaced. Abed, who had refused to take us to Tahrir Square earlier was annoyed because we wandered off without him. Although we were probably the only two young women without a male escort, there were other women present. At the time, I attributed Abed's refusal to take us as being 'too chicken.' But reflecting on it now, perhaps my girl friend and I weren't performing our gender according to the standards of Egyptian society. And perhaps Abed didn't want to feel responsible for the repercussions that an unbecoming performance could create.

Grabbing our wrists to steer us out of Tahrir, he grumbled "Lets go." Obediently, we followed. Even with him close, other men stopped and jeered as we strode back to the Parliament building where our other friends remained. "What's going on?" I asked Abed. He looked at me with his eyebrows raised and said, "I don't know, but something's wrong....It's just that you don't understand what they're saying, but I do!" He wouldn't tell me what was said, but the peculiar aura of the crowd, coupled with Abed's demeanor told me something did happen. At the twilight of the night, the pseudo-egalitarian bubble that emerged over the 18 days in Cairo's political hub of Tahrir Square popped.

Perhaps the strange aura was coincidental, but it was on that day that CBS News correspondent Lara Logan was attacked and molested by an unknown group of assailants. Her interview with 60 Minutes would not be reported until three months later on May 1, 2011, but her statements sparked a heated debate- particularly in American media- about the rights of women in Egypt (Schlussel 2011, Newcomb 2011). Nevertheless, it was clear that the utopian ambience felt by many during the eighteen days of insurrection quickly dissipated with political shifts. In many ways, this event marked a noticeable shift in the inclusivity of political participation. While women's contributions were indispensable during the initial eighteen days and after, their voices and concerns were muted and deemed deviant and subsidiary to political concerns. This event compels us to think about how publics are formed and who has access and the right to participate within it.

Although Egyptian citizens were elated about the departure of Hosni Mubarak, many protested that the regime was still present and would not be satisfied until the entire regime was dismantled. Others, who chose to protest about other societal issues, believed it was time to voice their desires in order to change the social, cultural, and religious patterns prevalent in Egypt. Consequently, on March 8, 2011 two major events occurred: International Women's Day and a sectarian clash. International Women's day takes place every March 8th and is observed differently depending on the country and region. This March, however, marked the centennial celebration and Egyptian women in particular took this opportune moment to discuss political and societal goals, but were met with conflict from disgruntled men. In addition, this day was overshadowed by the sectarian

strife that would ensue later that evening. At the time, it was the worst outbreak of sectarian violence since Mubarak resigned, leaving 13 people dead and 140 people injured. Clashes began after approximately 2,000 Coptic Christians blocked a main highway, demanding the restoration of a church that was set ablaze in an earlier episode of sectarian strife in Helwan, twenty miles south of the capital. The materialization of these events led to SCAF's implementation of brutality against citizens the following day.

Attempting to discontinue unrest and turmoil brought about by the revolution, the Egyptian military tightened their grip on Egyptian protestors by violently clearing the square. It was on this day, that 17 women were beat and detained; seven were forced to undergo virginity tests ⁴. One of these seven women, Samira Ibrahim, sought legal action against SCAF. On November 2011, tahrirDiaries a subdivision of The Campaign to End the Military Trials of Civilians, uploaded Samira Ibrahim's full testimony onto YouTube so that her story would be publicized. Although her case was eventually dismissed, a civilian judge ruled the practice humiliating and prohibited virginity tests inside military prisons as of December 2011 (Al Jazeera 2011). This affair is one of the main events that key participants referenced as being significant for women during the Egyptian revolution because it projected violence against women into the local and international spotlight as well as engendered women demonstrations throughout Egypt.

⁴ To read about other narratives, please refer to the Nazra for Feminist Studies publication, "A Continuation of Violations: Military Policy toward Women Human Rights Defenders" December 2011.

By mid-August, Asmaa Mahfouz was arrested for inciting violence via social media and criticizing SCAF. The state-owned Middle East News Agency reported that she used her Facebook account to call for SCAF assassinations. On her account she wrote, “If the judiciary doesn't give us our rights, nobody should be surprised if militant groups appear and conduct a series of assassinations because there is no law and there is no judiciary.” Lawyer, Ali Atef stated that the prosecutors ordered that Mahfouz pay a fine or remain in jail for 15 days pending her trial date. Her bail money totaling 3,400 dollars is reported as being collected by fellow activists (Al Jazeera 2011). The case was eventually dropped four days later due to significant public pressure (Al Jazeera 2011). Her use of social media not only gestured the political capabilities of online participation, but also conveyed how individuals search and find news ways to contribute politically. This avenue is especially important when their voices are excluded by dominating sociopolitical practices from mediating authority between state and society.

Supporting the emerging trend of online activists, Aliaa Elmahdy posted nude photos of herself on October 23, 2011 to challenge the sociocultural configurations found in Egypt. Thereafter, Elmahdy's blog went viral receiving over two million hits (CNN 2011) and succeeded on Twitter with the hash tag #nudephotorevolutionary. A general outrage ensued in Egypt over these photos, one incident resulting in a legal case against Elmahdy for “violating morals, inciting indecency and insulting Islam” (CNN 2011). At the same time, Elmahdy has received an immense amount of support locally and internationally. This event brings up important concerns about the bodies of women and the symbolic

significance they harbor, particularly in relation to the virginity tests performed by military authorities early March.

Shortly after Elmahdy's political stand, Mona Eltahawy, a well-known American-Egyptian journalist tweeted on her account, "beaten arrested in interior ministry," on November 24, 2011. After being subjected to brutal beatings, resulting in a fractured left arm and right hand, she was held in custody for over 12 hours. In addition to the assault, she reported, "they [...] sexually assaulted me -- I was groped all over my body. I lost count of the number of hands that tried to get into my trousers." To justify the attack, Colonel Islam Jaffar, Head of the military's Morals Department in Central Cairo claimed that she did not have an Egyptian press pass to identify herself as a reporter. He was quoted in the New York Times as stating, "she complained to me that she was beaten and sexually assaulted by Central Security Forces but what did she expect would happen? She was in the middle of the streets, in the midst of clashes [...] we are under threat. She could be a spy for all we know" (Shadid 2011). This illustrating statement reveals that an increasing amount of concern has revolved around women, their bodies and expectant performances, roles, and access to certain publics. Colonel Islam Jaffar's inquiry, "What did she expect to happen?" is a foreboding precursor to another question that would frequently be asked in December 2011, "Why was she there?"

A month later, a woman dubbed the "girl in the blue bra," became the symbol for military brutality when a video captured soldiers beating and dragging her body through the streets during a demonstration. Her clothing ripped, thrown over her head, blue bra and

midriff clearly exposed, a soldier was captured on video stomping on her body. Although Egyptian military apologized, SCAF still accused protestors for instigating trouble. In response thousands of Egyptians protested against the violent treatment of women in Tahrir Square on December 20, 2011, chanting, “The women of Egypt are a red line.” Despite the general consensus of the unnecessary force wielded by the military, many questioned why the young woman was present, thereby placing blame on the victim.

Thus, the aforementioned events not only convey that the participants of this study acknowledge the thematic significance of women, but also illustrate the symbolic importance of women in politics by arousing debates about societal practices such as gender. Because culture is an integral part of society, people’s thoughts and actions mediate between enforced structural conditions and social outcomes. Political actors play a major role in social movements and revolutions by (re)producing different variations of normalized practices, which has the potential to create, and change understandings of societal configurations.

The Internet is beneficial for this type of engagement because it can capture and archive the various (re)productions found. The multiplicities of public discourses are key components needed to produce and create national culture. The rise of globalization and technology means that nation states can be understood as cultural artifacts in which, “technologies of production and imaginations can be analyzed as modes of ordering everyday life that can be ethnographically investigated” (Abu-Lughod 2005:9). Part of this challenge is trying to weigh the importance communicative technologies have on

people's lives, despite the reality that the Internet has no obvious community. This research seeks to contribute to that effort by focusing on the narratives of political actors to investigate the efficacy social media has on the political field.

Introduction to Five Participants

Nancy⁵ is a twenty-six year old Coptic Christian who lives in a gated three-story villa with a garden in Maadi, a predominately wealthy area of Cairo. I was interested in meeting with her because of her religious association, her self-proclaimed title as an activist, and her first tweet on February 11, 2011: "Tana7aa Finally he got the msg :) Plz guys go home." Tana7haa, meaning stepped down, coupled with the date, emoticon, and content of her tweet, not only indicated her dislike for former President Hosni Mubarak, but her concern for the events that began to unfold in Egypt as a result of protests. She was also the first person to tell me about Naguib Sawiris and his involvement with Mickey and Minnie Mouse. Her recollection of this event is what inspired me to research the use of women in social media during the Egyptian Revolution. Her narration conveyed that actors were using iconography and ideas about gender to express their political beliefs. Their activity did not only leave an imprint on society, but also aggravated other parties.

Mahmoud is twenty-seven years of age and defines himself as a veterinarian, a blogger, an activist, a photographer, a secularist, and a Sunni Muslim. He uses Twitter and other

⁵ The names of all participants have been changed to protect their identity.

social media avenues to discuss Egypt's political landscape. Devoted to developing his blog, and reporting live events, he contends that women in particular are important in the state building affairs of Egypt. He articulates the positive and negative effects of how discourses about women- famed in social media- are used for political purposes. His concerns are important because they beg the question, is the online sphere, a public of publics where subaltern groups could effectively express political agency to shape the field of politics? Or, is there a substantial difference between a ground activist and an online activist?

Samir a slim-built twenty-five years old Egyptian works as a dentist in a private clinic and multiple state-run hospitals. Clean-shaven and wide-eyed, his camera is an appendage, propelling him to constantly take pictures of whatever he finds interesting. He first started using social media in 2005 beginning with Facebook. As his appetite for politics grew he used other forums such as Twitter, Flickr and a blogging account for political purposes. At first, he was skeptical about the usefulness of social media, but since the uprisings he is one of many political actors who find that the authority of citizen journalism is more reliable than that of mass media. It was not surprising then to see that Samir's blog is entitled, "The Citizen." Sometimes written in Arabic and other times in English, it is a collection of his experiences, photos and reflections about important political events in Egypt. He like many others recognizes the second-class treatment women receive and believes that they are essential forces in shaping the political affairs of Egyptian society.

Dalia is a middle-aged Egyptian woman, originally from Alexandria. Apprenticing in hostels for eight years, she now finds herself working in the tourism sector owning her own hostel for the past two. In addition to managing her own business, she is a cofounder of the Revolutionary Women's Coalition (RWC) that was formed just days after Mubarak stepped down. The coalition was established when Dalia found herself questioning the lack of women in different political factions that emerged with Mubarak's resignation. The organization strives to encourage female empowerment, political participation by women, equality, and challenges stereotypes about women in what Dalia calls, "a man's society." Although an activist on all fronts (in offline and online publics) she is often disappointed about the lack of offline materialization by the political actors that are engaged with social media. Following her and her participation, her narratives convey how she attempts to exert and negotiate her agency by engaging in on- and offline to express her political consciousness.

Selima, a young, slim, Egyptian woman, with curly auburn hair shies away from labels, but explicitly identifies herself as a human first and a feminist second. According to her, a feminist believes in the basic concept of gender equality, but this epithet could only be obtained after years of personal growth and understanding. Employed by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women office in Cairo, she works with small initiatives to help youth reach their goals by providing outreach, technical, and mentoring assistance. Currently she is working on two projects. The first project is located in Minya, Upper Egypt and is a campaign about violence against women, which is expressed through an interactive community theatre. As one of the

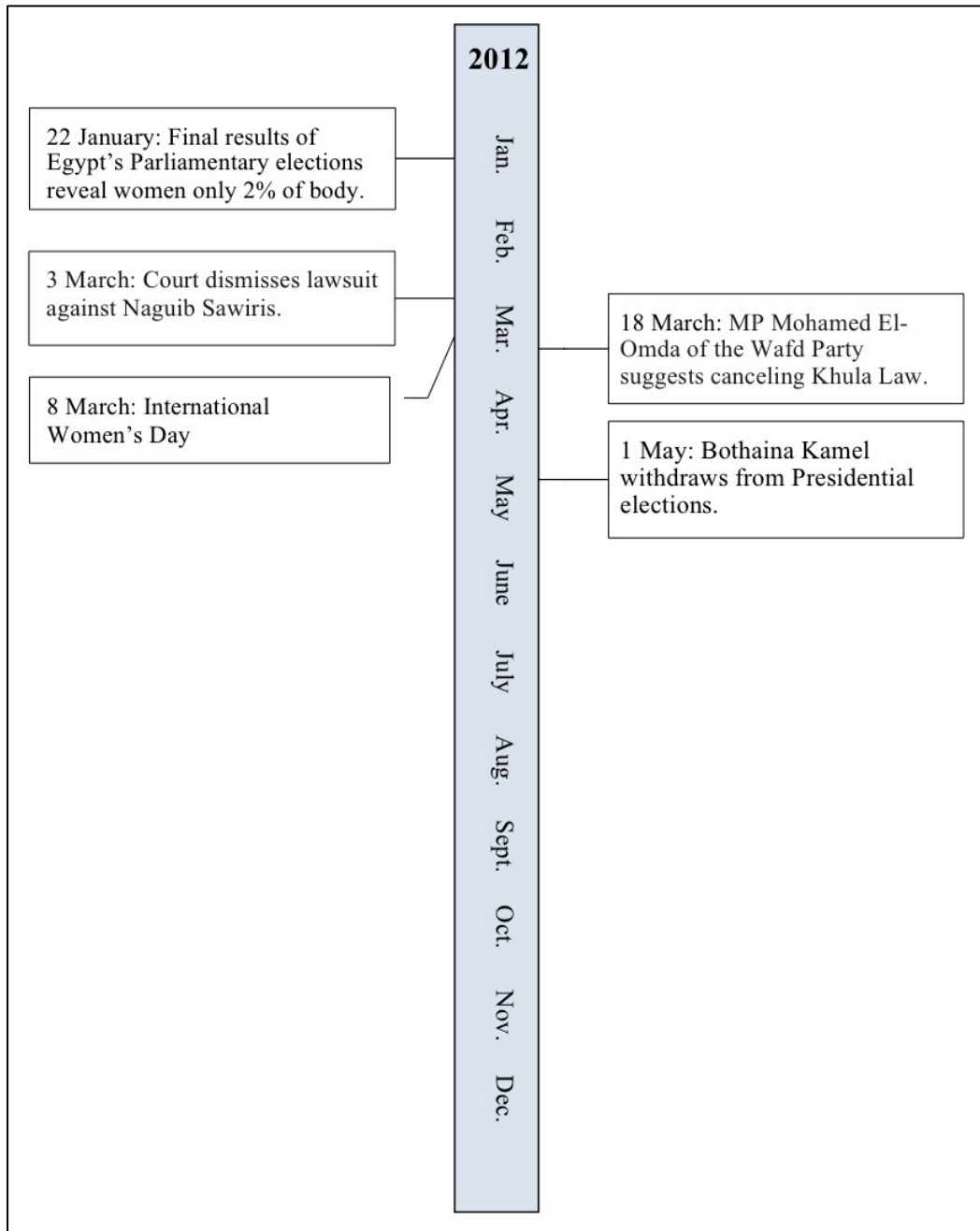
supporters, she helps train the youth of the area how to make, conduct, and collect surveys in order for the youth to understand the problems that violence against women creates. In addition, she is currently involved in a national campaign that seeks to provide at least two million national identification cards to the four million women in Egypt who do not possess one. This particular campaign is especially important to Selima because it allows women an additional opportunity to access different types of publics that enable them to: apply for loans, buy large appliances or buying land, etc. And yet, despite all the active work she does to promote gender equality and accessibility, she is cautious to apply the terms activist and activism loosely. Her narrative illustrates the ambiguous definition of activism and why she believes that gender equality must not develop as a women's movement.

In all cases, the narratives provided by the participants reveal a necessity of combining online and offline activism, but do not diminish social media's efficacy. Political actors employment of this outlet can help us understand how women's bodies and particular experiences in everyday life combine with the Internet to mark out various forms of publics.

Table 2.1 Chronology of Major Events: Women & the Revolution in 2011

2011		
25 January: Mass protests begin in Tahrir Square.	Jan.	28 January: Sally Zahran dies.
11 February: Mubarak resigns from power. CBS News Correspondent Lara Logan is attacked.	Feb. Mar.	8 March: International Women's Day. Sectarian clashes in Tahrir Square.
9 March: Egyptian military clamps down. Women subjugated to virginity tests.	Apr.	1 April: Bothaina Kamel announces her intention to run for President on Twitter.
24 June: Naguib Sawiris posts a picture of Mickey and Minnie Mouse wearing Islamic garments on his Twitter account, exacerbating Islamic stereotypes and sectarian strife.	May June	1 May: Lara Logan reports her assault on 60 Minutes
14 August: Online activist Asmaa Mahfouz is arrested and faces military trial for "inciting violence via social media."	July Aug.	18 August: Asmaa Mahfouz is cleared in a public statement by SCAF due to significant public pressure.
20 November: Bothaina Kamel, potential female presidential candidate sexually assaulted in Tahrir Square.	Sept. Oct.	23 October: Aliaa Magda Elmahdy posts nude photos of herself to protest violence, racism, sexism, sexual harassment and hypocrisy.
13 December: Famous Salafi preacher Sheikh Abu Ishaq al-Huwainia relates a woman's face to her vagina.	Nov.	25 November: American-Egyptian journalist Mona Eltahawy is subjected to brutal beatings and sexual assault by the riot police.
20 December: Egyptian women protest military brutality.	Dec.	17 December: Woman in blue bra brutally beaten. 27 December: Samira Ibrhaim's struggle results in small victory: court prohibits virginity tests in military prisons.

Table 2.2 Chronology of Major Events: Women & the Revolution in 2012



Publics

Since the late twentieth century, increasing interests have accumulated around shifts in geopolitics and anthropology's capability to provide accounts for large-scale political subjects or "publics" (Cody 2011:38). New social movements, growing monopolization, mass dissemination and access to digital media intensified these shifts, creating new theories about publics in order to understand how participation in communicative practices shape the trajectories of political powers and landscapes (Ibid:38). Indeed, many theorists (Arendt 1958, Goffman 1963, Cohn 1983) have articulated that representations of a public rely on the dismantlement of social structures and positions, and yet publics are almost always limited in that only particular types of people have access to and control over these publics.

Although the more recent theories are linked to culturalism in an age of globalization and alternative practices of modernity (Appadurai & Breckenridge 1988), the foundation behind theorizing publics begins with Jurgen Habermas' work, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1962, and the English translation in 1989. As such, this chapter begins by briefly reviewing Habermas' contributions as well as his limitations and proceeds in exploring how different variables alter the discursive field of publics. I am more concerned with the publics found within Egypt and its political activity; hence, I focus on the social interaction and public culture or aspects of identity that are used symbolically to become the subject matter of public debate. In doing so, my research situates the Internet and social media as platform that harbors multiple publics in which

images and discourses about women are utilized to impact the field of politics during the 2011 and 2012 Egyptian uprisings.

Habermas and Publics

With a unique inquiry into 17th-18th century Western European bourgeois (capitalist) class, Habermas sought to explain that a public sphere's (Offentlichkeit) effectiveness is contingent on its members exercising rational and critical dialogues in a discursive democratic space free from coercion (Cody 2011:38). For Habermas, the political function of the public sphere rests on the member's ability to disregard their social statuses and instead rely on the merits of their arguments to become the basis for authoritative political action (Habermas 1990:58). This rational-critical discourse would ideally mediate between state and society. The private sphere, however, is the domain in one's life that circulates around familial dynamics and thus is separate from the rest of society.

Although, Habermas' investigation of the public sphere was exclusive to literate private property owners and found the pinnacle of intellectual discourse grounded between the interactions of elites, he concluded that all members of society must be recognized in order for a democratic space to emerge. In his liberal model of the public sphere, membership was open to all citizens (Cody 2011:39). Even still, Habermas believed that inclusion of all members of society, combined with industrialization, commoditization, monopolization, and competition of state run resource distribution, were processes that

hindered the intellectual growth of rational-critical dialogues (Calhoun 1992, Robbins 1993).

In addition, the public sphere emerges as a social space outside state control. This rational-critical theory is often intertwined with the mass circulation of texts as a necessary condition for a congregation of strangers to act as a collectivity (Anderson 1991). Places of public discussion such as coffeehouses, salons, and newspaper stands were ideal places for this type of rational-critical dialogue because it mingled with conversations between strangers (Cody 2011:39). Therefore, the quality of arguments and participation would be decisive in determining any political action- not traditions, or social statuses.

A public according to Habermas then, is a relation amongst strangers that exists outside the control of sovereignty, and forged through a medium of common discourse (Ibid:39). It is a multicontextual space organized by the circulation of discourse and its basis rests on the communication- rather than domination of individuals- to transform the field of politics (Warner 2002, Calhoun 1995). Be that as it may, limitations found within Habermas' theory, led scholars to develop additional public formation theories as well as give credence to the notion of mass-mediated subjectivities (Anderson 1991, Appadurai 1996, Cody 2011). For example, scholars such as Fraser (1990), Warner (2002), and Eley (1992), emphasized the role of agency and argued that Habermas' original theory left little room for identity politics such as women in the public sphere.

Women and the Public Sphere

Due to the masculine authority of the patriarchal and western European liberal bourgeois public sphere, the importance of women was excluded from Habermas' original work. By creating a public/private divide Habermas relegated women's position and roles to that of the private domain linking them to activities such as housework, reproduction, religion, and caregiving. The structural definition of public, as a space where strangers engaged in rational-critical discourse, signified the private and all its associations to be labeled as improper subjects for public debate (Landes 1988:142). This dichotomy failed to recognize women as active citizens who are crucial in defining the flexibility of a public and the inclusivity of its constitution.

Similar to the patriarchal authority found in Europe, Egypt's public spaces regularly exclude women from participating in political affairs. An apt example of how individuals negotiate space and authority is exemplified in an interview I had with Dalia when she recalled International Women's Day on March 8, 2011. Dalia and a group of her colleagues went to Tahrir Square to peacefully celebrate the sacrifice of men and woman martyrs as well as to remind the public of women's importance in the revolution's materialization. The group she accompanied was comprised of a small configuration of women and an even smaller cluster of men. A party of men not belonging to Dalia's group became irritated and insisted that issues relating to women's roles and positions in society should not be addressed because it encourages division.

The anti-woman's day party grew unfriendly and echoed a different version of a popular revolution chant. "*Al shab yoreed esqat el nezam*" (the people demand the removal of the regime) became "*al shab yoreed esqatal madam*" (the people demand the removal of the lady/woman). In addition, the anti-women's day party demanded to know why a woman should have the opportunity to become President. This inquiry comes after many activists challenged the post-Mubarak Egyptian constitution in Article 26, which inadvertently or not, assumed the next Egyptian President would be a man⁶. "If you become President, what should I do?," shouted one man. "Should I eat bread? There's an educated man, but no he has to work at a shisha café, while a woman is President?!"

The notion that men are caretakers and providers for women is embedded in the production of gender in patriarchal values, which grant men authority over familial and public relations. This type of dominance was recognized by Dalia when she decided to form a coalition to challenge the authority of a "man's society." Given the presence of patriarchal values in family, and state, it's not surprising that the anti-women's day party felt threatened by women rejecting the assumption that the role of the President should be filled by a man.

"We were just like a bunch of women in the square doing nothing, maybe with some signs and that made the men so angry that they just started to beat us. Because there were more men than woman, they jumped and ran after us."

⁶ Since then, Article 26 has been revised to read, "It is required for whoever is elected president of the republic to be an Egyptian who has never held another citizenship, born of two Egyptian parents who have never held another citizenship, enjoying his/her political and civil rights, not married to a non-Egyptian, and not falling under the age of 40 years."

These signs did not consist of radical slogans, but factual pieces of information; women in Egypt lacked political representation. This angered the anti-women's day party and as if suddenly deciding the women had been there long enough, the party chased Dalia and her group of colleagues, forcing them to become divided outside the contours of Tahrir Square. One assailant dragged Dalia's friend to the ground by pulling her hair. As her friend was assaulted, an officer detected the incident and brought her and Dalia to the museum for further questioning. Despite the officer's prior assistance, he wanted to arrest them for being a part of the chaos that ensued. After insisting that they all lived in the area, the officer released them ordering them to go home. They had barely crossed the street from the museum to a fast food restaurant, when the assailants regrouped and resumed their attack.

"They started to beat and touch our bodies, and then we were stuck in the middle, all of us we could not move and of course they touched everywhere and grabbed and beat us. You know pulling hair, stealing some necklaces and some jewelry."

Unable to disperse the group, the army shot warning rounds into the sky. After Dalia's group reassembled, officers took them to a tourist agency to recover and then flagged down taxis for them to go home. The thug's harassment coupled with the officer's transfer of blame onto the women, reinforce the established patriarchal values of gender roles in Egypt which attempt to relegate women to a different sphere; a public distinct from the political activities found offline.

The struggle that ensued over International Women's day in 2011 was a battle over the use of public spaces and gender roles. These struggles often involve differential claims about the right to occupy spaces based on the exclusivity of membership (McDowell 2003:150). Theoretically, citizens should be equal and have the right to be in all public spaces; however, in practice this does not always materialize (Sandel 1996). Social groups and individuals are typically excluded from any public on the grounds that their behavior is transgressive, or their intolerance affects the rights of other individuals from joining the public as well. It is the latter concept that has continuously excluded women of having equal access to all publics.

As it were, the public sphere does not emerge as a democratic space inviting equal access to all citizens to rationally and critically debate issues of concern. Instead it is formulated by modernity and the current patterns for conduct and living (Gole 1996:65). In other words, a public sphere is a conceptual space that is created by the dominating powers of individuals which excludes those who do not conform to their lifestyle and conceptions of normality. A proper assessment of publics then, "would countenance not the exclusion, but the inclusion, of interests and issues that bourgeois masculinity ideology labels "private" and treats as inadmissible" (Fraser 1990:77). Within this context, "the existence of a public sphere is attested by women's visibility and the social intermixture of men and women" (Gole 1996:62). Thus, women are essential in testing the malleability of public boundaries and shaping modern political debates in patriarchal countries. The struggle that has been transpiring over gender discrimination in Egypt is directly associated with navigating individual's understanding of the types of roles

women should fill, many of which are colored by gender productions and normalized patterns of behavior. Thus, self-definitions, identity politics, and gender configurations are variables in which Habermas failed to find important, but are in fact central stakeholders in popular public debates and politics. Habermas' original conjecture universalized the features and participants of the public sphere, disregarding the fact that various social structures shape the making of publics, and therefore, cannot be easily or abstractly dismantled.

Nevertheless, the concept of a public sphere is an important analytical device in modern society because it helps us evaluate the relationship between media and civic engagement (Iosifidis 2011). Habermas' theory also gave rise to the notion that a public sphere is a conceptual space -rather than a physical- and it is expressed through the engagement of media. This creates an important departure point for analyzing media's role in communication, sociopolitical practices, and symbolism. Recently, the role of media in social relations and identities became more complex as media technologies and its uses surpass mass media (radio, television, film, print media in newspapers, etc.) and extend to communicative technologies mostly found on the Internet (email, social networking sites, music sharing, instant messaging, and other user generated content).

Because of the engagement with media, many would regard the Internet as a new public that developed over the past three decades (Rheingold 2003, Lynch 2005, Wheeler 2006). Social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube facilitate the creation and exchange of user-generated content and have been identified as aiding the most

recent social movements (Witt 2004, Haas 2007). Even so, the generalization of its capabilities sidesteps the real question of to what extent does socially mediated news and sociopolitical practices intermingle to effect society? Are communicative practices online and offline simultaneously redefining each other's boundaries? As expected, the basic features of publics are changing.

Social Networks and the Public Sphere

An idealistic view of the Internet presumes that it yields a new type of public, and thus a new type of democracy. Habermas' framework, however, calls for an open space where all members of society are able to participate. Access to the Internet alone hinders this utopian view, due to restrictions set forth by the state as well as political actor's option to remain anonymous. In truth, the Internet is not distinguishable from history or social processes, but is intertwined and developed in specific social, political, and economic contexts.

So how is the Internet a public? Many would argue that it is not. Jodi Dean author of "Why the Net is not a Public Sphere," seeks to understand the basic architecture of the public sphere by analyzing the prerequisites of creating one: equality, transparency, inclusivity, and rationality (2003). She argues that the Internet appears to be a public because of the various opinions and messages that circulate within it, but actually it is "a television, injecting banalities into passive consumer-junkies" (Ibid 99) Her point is to gesture that the Internet displaces political activity by redirecting energy into

communicative practices such as blogging. She contends that people feel like they are participating, but are actually held within a protected and contained space, unable to produce real change.

In a similar vein, Roberts and Crossley argue that rational-critical mediation isn't always conducted between its users. A public is an exchange of dialogue in which the merit of one's argument prevails. The Internet, however, is a space where the "loudest" voices typically triumph, thus losing the capability to rationally and critically transform the context of communication (2004: 5–6). Moreover, any communication on the Internet is contingent on the type of social networking transmission set forth. Social media users have the ability to control commenting and further engagement with any individual. Deleting contentious posts are tactics used to elevate individual's point of view and converge like-minded political actors. For example, Samir's repost of the YouTube recording of the 'girl in the blue bra' was originally uploaded by Nassapcenter, an organization that collects high profile media cases. Nassapcenter as the manager of the YouTube account has the option to enable a space for viewers of this video to discuss the contents of the recording. In turn, users have the power to not only respond and engage with other viewers, but also to vote if comments left by other individuals are appropriate to the conversation. For example, one user, "simon1988n" suggested that the 'girl in the blue bra' was a prostitute and used degrading words to discourage people from sympathizing with her. Because simon1988n's statement lacked rational and critical commentary, users rejected his comment by voting it unfavorably. This effectively hid the statement from view and replaced it with a link stating, "This comment has received

too many negative votes.” Although individuals still have access to simon1988n’s remark, the act of voting does two very important things. First, it hides the comment from the flow of conversation, virtually snubbing the user. Secondly, it indicates to other individuals that partake in the conversation that comments similar to those are unwelcome.

Thus, the theory of the public sphere has always been dependent on some sort of media to *create* a space for dialogue (Bohman 2004:134). Historically, texts that circulated in books, newspapers, etc., first served this purpose, shaping the possibilities of many-to-many communication. Social media sites found within the Internet, are also spaces where actors have the opportunity to express their opinions to an unidentified audience and in turn are responded to with other viewpoints. This formation of dialogue can be continued to an indefinite future, thereby escaping temporal, as well as spatial limitations. Therefore I agree with Bohman in that the Internet is not a public because the dialogue can be heard or read by anyone, but rather are *publics* because the dialogue can address and be addressed by anyone at any time. This formation of publicity is a necessary condition for any public (Ibid:134).

Indeed, with the plurality of actors come the histories and social processes that they carry. Unlike Dean’s assertion that the Internet is not a public sphere because individuals are protected and contained within a defined space, Bohman argues that the enormity of today’s transnational public is too vast for communicative action to control the contours of the social space, and multiple publics unavoidably emerge (2004). The Internet, like a

public is neither a political institution nor civil society, but somewhere in between (Habermas 1989:xi). Therefore, there exists “many publics and overlapping public spheres. A city’s institution may create a local public sphere, but that public overlaps with and interacts with other publics” (Bohman 2004:137). For the Internet to successfully, become a public sphere in and of itself, actors must engage in rational-critical dialogue and be engaged with the publicity of the Internet. Because of that, the Internet harbors multiple publics, but is not a public. Nevertheless, Habermas’ theory is important because it provides an analytical device in modern society that helps us evaluate how various authoritative powers mediate between state and society.

Conclusion

According to Habermas, a public is a space where a congregate of unknown members engages in communicative discourses. It should be a democratic space where actors are able to rationally and critically debate the value of their argument. The quality of the argument, ideally, mediates between state and civil society. Habermas’ theory, however, emerged in the context of a male-dominated bourgeois society, and excluded identity politics. Because subordinated social groups were excluded, different types of publics emerged in order to engage with discourses about their identities and interests. These publics emerged in various mediated outlets, one of which was social media.

The Internet is made up of many publics because it carries “a constellation of communicative spaces in society that permit the circulation of information, ideas,

debates— ideally in an unfettered manner—and also the formation of political will (i.e., public opinion)” (Dalhgren 2005:148). Thus, the Internet as a network of networks fosters multiple publics in which political actors negotiate identity, politics, authority, and social and cultural practices. As Nemat Guenema and Nadia Wassef aptly observe in their book, *“Unfulfilled Promises: Women’s Rights in Egypt,”*

“Research on the history of women and the discourse of gender provides women’s advocacy groups with the arguments they need to discredit the myths and misconceptions about Middle Eastern women that prevent them from entering the public space. Because history in the Middle East is so highly politicized, the point still needs to be made that women participated in major historical events and that feminism is not a [W]estern import” (Guenema and Wassef 1999:16).

Even though social media cannot bring about revolutions, it can be used as a forum that widens the possibility of political involvement by encouraging a more active participation by raising public awareness, testing public opinion trends, rallying support for a political cause, triggering public mobilization, boosting civic engagement, and enabling citizen journalism. These activities are an attempt to move beyond acceptance of mainstream media in an effort to re-envision and transform existing public spheres. Unlike Dean’s conjecture that participation online dislocates political activity, this research situates the Internet and its publics as part of the everyday structures of society that could produce change.

Although, it is important not to overestimate its influences by suggesting that this outlet alone can bring about social transformation; it is equally important to be aware of its increasing use by political actors and its capability to restructure and define emerging

publics (Khamis and El Nawawy 2011). As political actors attempt to transform political, economic and social structures, how are we as anthropologists supposed to interpret the symbolic use of women in a society where a revolution is materializing? Is there a different level of effectiveness in participation politically offline or online? In the next chapter I attempt to answer these questions by examining how political actors define activism. This will elucidate how effective they think cyber activism is in creating change.

III. TERMS OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

“Being a vocal female media professional in the MENA is an act of heroism. Women work within a context rife with offline, psychological, and emotional blackmail in addition to gender discrimination.” Loubna Skalli

Social media takes on many different forms including e-zines, blogs, wikis, podcasts, photographs, videos, etc. The interactive dynamics of social media allow individuals to document their own stories through their own media representations. It offers new content, experiences and alternative interpretations that provide different sources of authority. This content has the potential to either reinforce existing social patterns or introduce new resources for knowledge. It is the latter reason that encourages individuals to counter dominant ideologies (Bunt 2010). In this way, political actors take a more active role in constructing societal configurations by creating spaces for dialogue where individuals can debate and challenge normalized values (Debrix 2003). With this potential, varied applications of social media may condition the level of political efficacy in offline spaces.

In addition, the various publics found within the Internet give political actors the capability to expose other aspects of their identity that may otherwise be concealed due to external pressures from the family and state or internal pressures from the self. Thus, the Internet is becoming increasingly integrated within the established system of political communication. This is possible because it facilitates the expansion of more divergent voices to participate and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of dominating

sociopolitical practices. For example, social media is important in contexts of asymmetric power dynamics, such as gender relations in Egypt, in which daily practices are often framed through the lens of patriarchy and gender production. In these cases, social media offer alternative perspectives from the dominant discourses, providing different frameworks for analysis. These user-generated representations are especially valuable because they produce different images and understandings of social constructions in Egypt.

Why Social Media?

At a Google Days event in Egypt on December 12th 2010, Google Marketing Manager for the Middle Eastern and North African region Wael Ghonim predicted that by 2015 Internet users in the Middle Eastern world are expected to reach 100 million. Used to construct social and political relationships, the Internet has been employed with increasing enthusiasm since the tide of activism during the so-called Arab Spring. Thus, the interactive qualities of social media are redefining the dynamics of publics found within Egypt. The manifestations and complexities of this notion have been evident by the many individuals who hold online journalism as more credible than state controlled media. For example, Nancy, a political actor I discovered in the contours of the web, expressed:

“When I hear something happening I go to Twitter, because I think it’s more reliable than the news. I got so annoyed with the news. I didn’t know what was right and what was wrong, so I refused to watch anymore.”

Nancy's preference with user-generated content implies that individual political actors are trust worthier than mass media, an emotional resonance that prevails among many Egyptian citizens. Engagement with social media was primarily triggered by the desire to access and narrate alternative analyses about the unrest unfolding in Egypt. This partiality with social media has led many political analysts to hastily label revolutions during the so-called Arab Spring as 'Facebook' or 'Twitter' revolutions. These epithets originate from political actors using social media forums to coordinate meeting places and tactics during the January and February uprisings in 2011. In an attempt to curtail protests, the Egyptian government ordered phone companies to block access to the Internet and cell phones. Met with pure outrage, it was during these times that the demonstrations reached maximum participation. Moreover, Mubarak's decisions to block media is indicative of the capabilities social media has in empowering and mobilizing people.

Narratives About Social Media's Purpose & Effectiveness

Social media may affect different aspects of mobilization due to its networked character. For example, it may reduce the costs of collective action by facilitating communication and coordination. In an interview with Mahmoud he discussed how he understood its connectivity capabilities: linking individuals across the globe and marketing campaigns.

"I think that Egyptians can't live now without Internet, without YouTube, without Twitter [...] The main topics of a lot of talk shows are reflections of our discussion on social media sites. We can't live without the Internet because social media gives us a free wide space to express our dreams as Egyptians, to communicate with each other as Egyptians [...] I feel more connected, more interactive. We dream by Internet now."

In this sense, Mahmoud find's value in the interactive qualities of social media because it congregates Egyptians in a conceptual space. The congregation of Egyptians online has the capability to change perceptions about 'real' distributions of people's opinions. In other words, Egyptian state TV's portrayal of opinions circulating in Egypt may be vastly different than how most Egyptians feel about a particular event. This is reflected in Mahmoud's statement when he suggests that even talk show hosts use material found online to constitute topics for their television shows. The relationship found between these online dialogues and on-air productions may encourage others to feel safe in stating similar positions and empowering people to take to the streets.

In another interview, Samir reflected on the effect social media had on his self-importance as well as daily life.

"I have some of my friends that ask me before just after the revolution, what newspaper are you reading. I told him I'm never reading newspapers. Why read lies every day. I don't need to buy a newspaper, because I am the one making the news, I am the one making history."

Contrary to the more traditional methods of top-down information found in television, radio, and newspapers, the Internet allows a new form of interactivity. This allows political actors to selectively share information and communicate with other individuals or affiliations. It also empowers people to take control of how information is produced and distributed. This aspect of social media is especially important to Samir, because his production of knowledge reinforces a sense of pride found in his ability to capture his own version of the truth. It also situates his activities as contributing to the Egyptian

revolution by fighting social and political injustice, and redistributing events he thinks are influential through alternative media.

Despite the narratives from activists that believe social media can create change, recently, researchers (Lynch 2005, Gladwell 2010, Morozov 2011) have revolved around the question of cyber-activism's capabilities to filter into publics found offline and create change. This particular mode of thinking, however, reinforces the online/offline dichotomy and fails to acknowledge the increasing blurred boundaries of that rigid division. In order to investigate the different understandings of activism and the effect of social media, we must first understand how and why scholars have distinguished between the two spaces.

Online/offline dichotomy

Scholarship engaged with the sociopolitical impact of the Internet and other communicative technologies focus on the location of the individual (Shields 2000, Dodge & Kitchen 2000). In other words, individuals are either thought of as being on- or offline but never simultaneously. This is mostly attributable to the prominent notion that the Internet is a virtual space.

Earlier scholarship has frequently emphasized that the physical body's absence in cyberspace is important in distinguishing between the two spaces. This distinction suggests that users online produce a nuanced form of an identity. This 'virtual' identity

can reflect or deflect any relation of the self: age, gender, race, religion, class, as much as desired. Thus many scholars (McRae 1995, Star 1995) claim that differentiation between online and offline publics can be summarized in terms of disembodiment and anonymity, which emphasizes a radical separation between online and offline identities (Slater 2002).

Disembodiment & Anonymity

Similar to the ways in which online interaction seemingly detaches one from their physical surroundings, disembodiment detaches one's identity from their physical presence. It gestures that a person's online identity is somehow masked or different from their offline self. This condition has been associated in scholarship with textuality and anonymity (Ibid 2002). Although new channels of communication such as Skype or other forms of live video communication are becoming more prevalent on the Internet, most communication between people is through the medium of text (although images and videos can be found as complimenting such interaction). Thus, others only know an individual by what they type⁷. Claims about themselves typically cannot be verified or contradicted through the body and its expressions (Ibid:536). That is to say, an individual's online performance of identity has to be taken for face value because identity markers such as sex, age, race, and at times class and religion, are not visible to prove otherwise. Within this context, scholars have distinguished between on- and offline spaces. In other words, online spaces are thought of as different entities because it provides spaces in which one can perform whatever identity they choose as well as

⁷ For an interesting discussion on 'you are what you type' refer to, "A 'Gay Girl in Damascus', the Mirage of the 'Authentic Voice' - and the Future of Journalism," by Daniel Bennett.

produce entirely new identities that are inconceivable in the offline world due to bodily and social constraints.

Problems with the online/offline dichotomy

On the other hand, some scholars claim that the Internet does not have independence from offline contexts. Lori Kendall, for example, identifies that while individuals online have greater choice in choosing how they wish to present themselves “gendered, raced and classed identities continue to have salience in online interactions.” Similarly Steve Jones specified, “Not only is it important to be aware of and attuned to the diversity of on-line experience, it is important to recognize that online experience is at all times tethered in some fashion to off-line experience” (1999:10). Or to put it quite simply “nobody lives only in cyberspace” (Kendall 1999:78).

Moreover, the conception that anonymity somehow allows individuals to perform any identity they chose disregards that all social markers of identities can be performed. This not only problematizes the issue that identity markers such as gender, race, and class might not have any importance in cyber space, but also disregards offline or ‘real’ identities as performances.

Thus, if ‘real’ identities and ‘virtual’ identities are both performances, then it is irrelevant to distinguish between online and offline publics based on anonymity and disembodiment. By continuing the belief that on- and offline spaces are distinct, we miss

how structured relations such as gender are molded and re-shaped. In order to avoid this, we should focus on how individuals are indexing on and offline worlds simultaneously.

In sum, the question of how online publics differ from offline publics already assumes that a distinction exists, while simultaneously disregarding the implications of human subjectivity. Thus, the real question to be asked is: are Internet users making distinctions between the two spaces, and if so why and when are they doing it? The following sections convey that the participants of this study distinguished between the on- and offline spaces only to define what they believed to be *real* activism. Despite this, their understanding of activism may become more nuanced as we investigate the blurring boundaries of on- and offline worlds.

What is a Twitter Activist?

Discourses about 'real' activism

In a broad sense activism can be described as actions used through vigorous campaigning to bring about social or political change. These actions can range from engaging in political discourses, organizing lectures, marches, demonstrations and sit-ins, signing petitions, joining campaigns, as well as boycotting goods. Cyber-activism follows a similar process but produces different types of interactivity. The degree and effectiveness of political participation found within social media is not just an academic discourse, but is also a concern of many of the participants of this research. Mahmoud for example, expressed that being an activist is distinctly different from being an online activist.

According to him, a blogger is someone that just reposts about events that have already taken place. True activism is only found in offline spaces.

“if you are a blogger, and an activist at the same time, that means you are on the ground participating with the protests and the demonstrations and covering, or making a live broadcast for the event or you have some focus ...like on military or making interviews with the victims and then you have a reflection of all of that on the blog.”

Mahmoud’s understanding of activism requires offline activity. According to him, reporting on events in which one did not participate, does not qualify individuals to call themselves political activists. For example, he recalled an event where protesters demanded the end of military rule and brutality. At this event, (or within this public) cartoon images of soldiers dragging women in the street became representative of the military’s indecent practices and unjust rule. But more importantly it symbolized that women were tired of being left out of political affairs.

“This was an amazing demonstration for me because Egyptian women have been fighting for their rights. About 30,000 Egyptian women protested in Tahrir, protesting the beating of Egyptian women at the Cabinet. You remember this event? At Qasr el Aini, and you know, with these amazing women participating” Navigating through his storage of images he showed me a haunting photo of an elderly woman present at the demonstration. Against the soft folds of etched, wrinkled skin, one could see the beautifully defined cheekbones of her face. Despite the various creases that gathered, bent, and curved at every angle, she seemed to render a faint smile. “This *woman* came to Tahrir Square with 30,000 other women to protest the beating, the raping and the sexual

harassment of women from army forces,” Mahmoud recalled with an air of admiration. His photo not only demonstrates and record women’s objection to being ostracized to a separate public, but also reinforces the popular belief that a physical attempt must be made, despite the present dangers of incursion.

The idea that a physical attempt needs to be made in order to effectively engender change is a popular belief found throughout my investigation. In the same way that the notion of disembodiment has been used by scholars to differentiate between on and offline spaces, it is also used by the participants of this study to differentiate between “just a blogger” and a real activist. This is apparent in Mahmoud’s surprise of the physical attempt made by an elderly woman during a women’s march.

Perhaps this conceptualization can be attached to the potential dangers or resistance that physical activism can engender. Although online activists’ bodies can encounter danger due to individual and state surveillance of the Internet, historically struggle and violence has been closely linked with bodies and their engagement with other like forces. More specifically, Mahmoud’s own admiration of the woman may be the result of how productions of gender construct his consciousness. For example, authorities associated with the nation-state and the symbolic deployment of nationalism make demands of men to protect and love his country. During times of unrest, the relationship between the state and the nation invoke heroic values that encourage men to perform valiant practices.

Yet individual comprehension might be remarkably different from the public projection of that struggle and the prominent practices and virtues associated with men. For Mahmoud, this event highlights women's struggle against military brutality. His elation is a result of women producing seemingly 'male' practices of bravery by participating in a public wrought with political strife.

Selima too, another participant of this research, expanded on this thought by suggesting that activists are historic figures "like Palestinian activists who were exiled in their struggle." In this sense, physical sacrifice and danger are components that Mahmoud and Selima associate only with 'real' activists.

"I don't want to generalize, but they're are so many "activists" who are just tweeting, or going to a protest and taking a few pictures," she said disapprovingly. Pursing her lips and rolling her eyes she imitated what she thought a "Twitter activist" would do at a demonstration. Clicking her tongue she said in mimicry "'I'm at this, I'm at that, and it's crowded, and its chaotic, and historic, and epic,' and then... they leave!" she said scoffing. "While other people are in the front lines being beaten, being humiliated, and no one even knows their names."

Within this context, Selima's definition of an activist disregards electronic forms of political participation because she believes it is a lesser form of quality and does not create passionate and embodied experiences. In her opinion, people who would otherwise traditionally participate now rely on technology as a method of exerting energy and

receiving recognition to become an authority. Even if we understand that online political participation is a type of activism, it may be a less efficacious way for individuals to reach their desired goals. The quality of participation Selima references is also known as slacktivism. Slacktivism, is a critique on cyber activism, which indicate that the political activities found have no impact offline, but only serve to increase the feel-good factor of the participants (Morozov 2009). It is a term used to trivialize the activities of political actors that do not engage with complete political commitment.

For example, Dalia first used social media to become politically active and create the Revolutionary Women's Coalition. In her creation of RWC, she used Facebook as a forum to help circulate information about events, potential candidates, and decisions that impacted the roles and statuses of women. It provided a space where she could clearly map out the intent of her new coalition establish new relationships and forge alliances (Skalli 2006).

However as members of the coalition continued to use and update social media sites, there was a noticeable decline in the attendance of events offline. It made members passive displacing political energy and confusing online rhetoric with substantial political action and activities (Morozov 2009). To the dismay of Dalia, online activism and participation did not materialize to the same effect offline, thus leading Dalia to tell me that the coalition was not really active at the moment. It was not until after the RWC started to hold events and protests the following year that she deemed the movement revived.

In sum, the critique that dismisses online activism as slacktivism is a critique aimed at low effort activities that are thought of as ineffective methods to alter the political scene. In other words, changing your Facebook picture to the Egyptian flag is not a form of political participation (Christensen 2011). However to some extent, this critique is overstated. As Christensen points out, not many traditional acts of political participation require a great deal of efforts of participants. Signing a petition or even voting doesn't require a great deal of sacrifice, especially if the government sanctions these actions. Furthermore, it assumes that private and public expressions of political demands are the same- a distinction we know to be untrue given the opportunity the Internet provides for unguarded expressions to manifest (Papacharissi 2010).

Despite the view that Selima and Mahmoud and perhaps even Dalia have about 'real' activism, it is clear that social media has expanded the spectrum of citizen participation without, "sacrificing recruitment, mobilization or political hierarchies" (Aouragh 2008:120). At the very least, it can be said that social media is made up of publics where actors voice their opinions and contribute to citizen journalism as an alternative form of knowledge. This alternative source for expressions may shape the level and terms of participation offline through its influence. For example, in 2006 in Moldova, protests organized by Facebook, Twitter, and text messaging, led to the downfall of the Communist Party after a corrupt election (Shirky 2010). Likewise, the Catholic Church faced lawsuits after Boston Globe's 2002 expose of sexual abuse in the church went viral (2010).

Social media has become an integral part of life with the advent of globalization, and involves many actors: journalists, citizens, governments, organizations, etc. As the landscape of digital communications gets more complex, more opportunities arise for public discourses to emerge to prompt collective action. Because of this fluid relationship, many have recognized the growing importance of online media and have developed user-generated content for both local and international audiences (Ibid). The integration of communicative technologies in daily life blurs the boundaries between offline and online spaces.

Blurred Boundaries

My argument throughout this research maintains that the dialectical relationship between publics found on- and offline impact the political field in various degrees. Political participation can be found in different forms and degrees of struggle (Bayat 1998). These struggles can be located in big political demonstrations, individual blogs, or embedded within everyday subtle survival strategies that are dominated by overarching ideological practices (Aouragh 2008).



Figure 3.1
“Facebook Poster” Picture taken
from:
<http://www.demdigest.net/blog/?s=d>
isillusion

The combination of politics and technological developments, convey that cyber activism is increasingly becoming a conventional tool used to participate, such as was the case

with its predecessors of posters, flyers, word-of-mouth, etc. Although the participants of the study may be adamant about what defines a ‘real’ activist, there is a general consensus that political images and discourses produced and distributed online (as I will illustrate in greater detail in chapter 4) can affect the political field in diverse ways.

In addition, posters and other types of media have circulated throughout the revolution in public spaces offline. In one famous poster (depicted above) the word ‘Facebook’ is in white letters against a colored-in blue background; a representation of the Facebook logo itself. Underneath is a hash tag written ‘#jan25’ in black letters which indexes the social media site Twitter. A line of various body shapes hold hands and are shaded in with the colors of the Egyptian flag. This drawing separates the hash tag and the slogan ‘The Egyptian Social Network’.

In other posters, protestors took a still image of the video that captured the ‘girl in the blue bra’ being assaulted by military soldiers. Or similarly, Aliaa Elmehdy’s nude political gesture is likened in graffiti art outside the Egyptian cabinet. The images and discourses produced and redistributed online effect offline spaces for several important reasons.

First, these symbols become emblematic of how social media has been exercised to challenge and transform spaces that were a crucial part of a rigidly constructed system that regulates bodies and the production of gender. Second, the redistribution of images indexes the context in which they are found and illustrates that social media has a

discursive relationship with offline spaces. It is a way of making those events or mediums as visible as possible to not only political activists, but to spectators and journalists who come to take photographs and report on live events. This gestures to individual's interaction with social media and what they believed to be vital in shaping the political field. Thus, it is becoming increasingly important to try and understand how on- and offline publics overlap each other, and how this interface changes social and political life.

Conclusion

As I have tried to demonstrate in this chapter social media has the capability to increase actor's participation in shaping the political field. The Internet provides a space that creates unique opportunities for individuals to exert authority. Although access to social media remains limited to most citizens in Egypt, it can be used to both facilitate networking, as well as claim a public space to engender issues of concern to individuals (Travers 2003).

Political actors of this study used social media to engage and redistribute events they found worthy of discussion and recognition, as well as mobilize and organize events. Indeed, the Internet has been useful in that it not only provides an avenue where political actors can contribute to political dialogue, but also is resourceful in communicating strategic aims. User-generated content has the potential to influence the way citizens think or facilitate collective action. It may affect contentious politics as a result of affecting the citizens who engage with it. Even Selima, who is hesitant about employing

the term activist, understands the Internet and its possibilities as vital in the shaping the 21st century.

“Social media is no longer an option. It’s a big tool used to challenge issues and give statements to mobilize, specifically for women. Traditional media is still not gender sensitive, it doesn’t address women issues properly. Women are still portrayed as manipulative figures or as the woman who is away from aspirations and dreams. For regular women and girls who aren’t activists, social media is an easy way to express themselves.”

As a result of the patriarchal values in society that produce gender in specific ways, women are finding different avenues to actively participate and shape the social structures in Egypt. Women’s use of social media and discourses about women in social media has as much leverage of effecting national dialogues as any other public would have on the sociopolitical landscape. This is particularly true if we understand that societal constructions are not absent of gender productions.

Because communicative technologies have probed the routines of everyday life, social media and other forms of communicative devices cannot be disregarded. Discourses about major events as well as campaigns and propaganda produced online are indeed social artifacts that can be analyzed as they spill into various publics. To further illustrate the blurred boundaries of on- and offline publics I show how the symbolic deployment of women and their bodies can be used to alter and affect the political landscape.

By analyzing these choice events that the participants of the research referenced as being moments of significance, this research conveys that women as a category are important because they are used as structuring elements. As a category, gender is crucial in defining

who has access to particular types of publics. Moreover, individuals who conform to these gendered practices and roles reinforce boundaries established by gender productions. The point of extending this view to online spaces is to make the case that social practices found in the cyber world are social artifacts that can be analyzed, as its production impacts life offline in new ways.

IV. WOMEN'S BODIES & SOCIAL MEDIATED PUBLICS

“Tell people there is no spring without flowers, likewise there is no Arab Spring without women. -Dalia Ziada

Due to the unequal characteristics associated with gender production and practices, women are being underrepresented and barred from decision-making positions. And yet the conceptual category of women is almost always used to reference or influence political discourses. For example, during the parliamentary elections in 2011, liberal and conservative parties alike exploited images of women to enhance their campaigns. Dalia Ziada asserted on her blog that liberal parties and Islamist groups deliberately placed women candidates at the bottom of their lists because Egypt's patriarchal values would never allow such a bold statement that challenged traditional gender hierarchies.

In addition, female representation in the Egyptian parliament has fallen from 12% to less than 2% since the revolution; demolishing the 64-seat quota reserved for women. The participants of this research as well as others (Elthaway 2011) attribute the decline of women in Egypt's parliament to the increase of Islamist participation. They argue that the lack of women's visibility within political campaigns had a major impact on the number of women elected. This point is exemplified when at a women's event, Dalia recalled the representation of women within Al Nour Party campaign in which the female candidate's photographs were replaced with images of flowers.

“Frankly, I found it quite funny, but painful at the same time. A campaign with a bunch of men’s pictures and a flower exacerbates those stereotypes embedded onto us making many people believe that women are inferior beings.”

Dalia’s recollection of this campaign indicates that the lack of women’s visibility hinders the progression of women’s statuses in Egypt. The lack of women seen in political campaigns may be due to social constructions and how individuals choose to perform their gender. The production and utilization of gender is crucial in maintaining the constitution of patriarchy and its values. These values authorize ‘men’ to perform practices that coincide with leadership and dominance in other societal constructions such as the family, politics, and the state. Men’s control over public formation excludes women from participating equally based on the types of characteristics that are associated with that gender. In patriarchal countries, women and their roles are relegated to private spheres or the home. By using flowers to symbolize women candidates, the men as the administrator’s of that campaign, are forcibly applying gendered practices of exclusion by hiding their faces and bodies from the various publics found within Egypt.

Gender critiques of visibility led political actors to demand more adequate mediated representations of women as a way to challenge normalized characteristics associated with ‘women’ and gendered performances. Instead, stories about women are rarely acknowledged in mass media as newsworthy and are bracketed into stereotyped representations (Sreberny 2005). Representation is a concern because stereotypes create a narrow spectrum in which women in media are typically sexually objectified or victims of violence.

For instance in 2002, New Woman's Research Center in Cairo investigated women's roles and positions in 18 Egyptian television series during Ramadan. The results exhibited 500 episodes in which 43% of women characters were the victims of violence, 13% of them resulting in fatality (Skalli 2006). Since Egypt is the Middle East's powerhouse for movie productions, the researchers used the findings to illustrate Arab medias failure to oppose violent behavior against women and oppression (Raad 2004). This type of portrayal aggravated the prevalent stereotypical descriptions that surround Middle Eastern women: passive, submissive, victims of violence. In truth, many of the high profile events that the participants referenced as being moments of significance for women were instances in which women were either associated with violence or sexual debauchery. Although Dalia and many others associate this with the rise of Islamist participation, the symbolic significance women carry is directly related to how genders are produced and performed.

Women's bodies and their adornment has remained a site of contestation for feminist theorists. Specifically, the debates balance between the need for more positive imagery of women and the problematic authority of producing those images, because they are frequently recaptured by the dominant imaginary and re-typified (Whitford 1991). Although bodies serve as a billboard for meanings, they are not simply symbols of social values, but also mechanisms of social power and control (Bordo 1993).

Thus, interpretations of the body are contingent on the spaces and historical background in which they are found. This in turn conditions notions of self, person, and the subject. It

is a site where ideals and opinions are challenged; a symbol upon which social meaning is inscribed. Mary Douglas, one of the first scholars to illustrate the symbolic significance of the body argued, “there is a strong tendency to replicate the social situation in symbolic form by drawing richly on bodily symbols in every possible dimension” (1970:vii).

Given the complexity of body and identity politics, the text of a body is subject to change over time due to internal pressures from the self, and the external pressures of society. As Csordas has noted in his term of embodiment, even within a single culture, the body carries sociopolitical histories and as such, are ever changing and influx (1994). To do, perform, and produce are elementary structures of embodiment (Butler 1997:3). Thus, when one becomes a gender, he or she is reproducing practices, values, and characteristics that are currently associated with that gender. These practices induce the body to then become a cultural symbol.

Because time and space dictates which sets of sociocultural practices are employed, it is useful to distinguish between the types of spaces that publics engender. Spaces can be defined as ‘approved’, ‘liminal’ or ‘subversive’ (Jones 2010). Approved spaces references spaces that are sanctioned by authority, while liminal spaces lie just beyond their reach and immediate control. A subversive space is *created* when an actor violates authority by performing an action in a public that prohibits such practices (Ibid). Liminal spaces, therefore, provide an ideal area for redefining and negotiating gender relationships and practices of the body. Thus, the body is a site for symbols, a

battleground for definitions, and a theatre for performances. Each body is a physical entity but also a representation and a medium of expression that is controlled, restricted, and produced by the social system (Douglas 1978). Therefore, I discuss how political actors use the body as an instrument of both active and passive political and symbolic power found on- and offline to impact the political field in peculiar ways. Some symbols are passive because they require the woman to remain voiceless, which displaces her from the processes of symbol making.

(En)gendering Female Bodies in Offline Spaces

Placing the Blame: The Girl in the Blue Bra

Egyptian State television has often been regarded as controlled and monitored by the Egyptian government. For that reason, political actors use liminal spaces located within the Internet in order to publicize and distribute events to create political consciousness. For example, one of the events that all participants referenced as being symbolically significant for women was an incident that recorded footage of a girl in a blue bra. In an interview with Mahmoud, he expressed that:

“The majority of men only deal with the woman as a body. Like the blue bra event. They can’t think that she has a brain; they can’t imagine that she is able to be a president or prime minister. They can’t imagine or accept that a woman might be his boss.”

The blue bra incident Mahmoud referenced occurred on December 16, 2011, when a small group staged a sit-in outside the Cabinet to demand the end of military rule since the ousting of Mubarak. Met with coercion, violence ensued when soldiers began to set fire to tents and attack protestors. During the struggle, a woman was assaulted and her blue



Figure 3.1
“Girl in the Blue Bra” Picture taken from
<http://www.npr.org/blogs/pictureshow/2011/12/21/144098384/the-girl-in-the-blue-bra>

bra was exposed. Mahmoud posted a link to the story, covered by the website Youm7 News in order to redistribute an event he felt needed more publicity. The image of the video clip showed military officers hovering over her disrobed body, one in the process of stomping on her torso. Although the identity of the woman in question is ambiguous, her picture would be known symbolically to represent the struggle of military officials and pro-democracy protestors. Egyptian blogger Faten Mostafa wrote on her Twitter account, “The blue bra is unforgettable and we all became ‘the blue bra’ girl one way or another.” As a result of this coercion, political actors launched a call on- and offline to protest the humiliation and abuse women were facing.

Although Mahmoud recognizes women as capable of fulfilling important political positions within society, he identifies that the mentalities in Egypt are embedded with patriarchal values that relegate women to the sphere of private and family life. The assault against women during political unrest can be interpreted as an attempt to

discourage women from entering the public sphere in order to reestablish the shifting gender performances since Mubarak's resignation.

Echoing Mahmoud's efforts, his colleague Samir covered the same incident and posted a link of the video, uploaded and disseminated by Nassapcenter. On Samir's blog, the post is entitled, "Egyptian Army Brutality Against "FEMALE" protester." Samir too felt that a repost of the video was crucial because it was "the first time Egyptians saw something like this." While it may have been the first time military force against women was recorded, publicized, and distributed to this degree, violence is something many Egyptians have dealt with regardless of gender. His shock around this assault is evident in his capitalization of the word "FEMALE" and his opinion that recorded brutality against woman is unfamiliar in Egypt's culture.

"It was shocking for all of us, especially because they are unarmed women. Women are symbols and that day, it was the first time for us to see them target women to beat. They use these things to take people away from the revolutionary core in order to create a barrier to discourage them to join the revolution, but actually they made the opposite happen."

In Samir's opinion the army attacked women to discourage people from rallying against military rule. He suggested that the military targeted women specifically because women carry symbolic weight. Thus, the image was used and circulated online to garner support against military rule and engender societal issues such as gender relations and participation of women in politics. In truth, shortly after the video footage went viral, a women's march took place on December 20, 2011. '*Banat masr, khatt ahmar*' 'the girls

(or daughters) of Egypt are the Red line” was a popular slogan that political actors used to assert that violence against women would not be tolerated. On the other hand, by asserting that women are a red line, political actors indicate that violence against women is a different level of brutality than violence against men. Although physical assault is appalling despite gender identification, the distinction inadvertently reinforces values that situate women’s statuses, roles and citizenry different from men.

Most cultures approve of some variation of punishment depending on the circumstances (Heise 281). Generally, these circumstances are defined by cultural values and societal expectations. If the punishment is culturally acceptable, then the abuse is typically justified. Conversely, if it is regarded as outside the scope of deserved discipline as either being too excessive or too lenient, then the behavior becomes subject to public sanction and attention (Ibid). Although the unknown soldier may have felt justified in his decision to punish the unknown woman because she wasn’t practicing normalized gender behavior, the force wielded on the ‘girl in the blue bra’ was viewed as excessive because it did not coincide with how individual’s performances of masculinity and femininity generally interact in Egypt. Samir’s own shock and the protests that followed, support the fact that gender practices carry symbolic weight.

In a conversation with Selima, she drew similar conclusions when she confessed to me that in her opinion the women marches that took place were not born out of concern for gender equality.

“I do not believe that most marches were in support of women’s rights. The Blue bra event was all about pride and honor of the Egyptian community.”

The outrage around the event was not because people agreed with the unknown woman’s right to be politically active, but because women in patriarchal frameworks are used symbolically to represent family values such as pride, honor, dignity, and respect. Her dilemma with society’s reaction to this event is that it did not come from the perspective that advocated gender equality, but rather promoted differences based off of gender produced values that dictate how women should be treated. This correlates with Baron’s discussion on nationalism, in which Egypt was personified a woman so men could protect and love his country, not violate and disrespect her. In order for women to successfully gain emancipation from gender roles, women’s issues and concerns must emerge as a societal problem.

Indeed, many people did not blame the army for exhibiting force, but rather blamed the young woman for creating a subversive space, or violating the authority of Egypt’s sociopolitical practices that assert women do not belong in public spaces of upheaval. On Samir’s repost, an individual named Dedy, entitled their post, “You Deserve What Happened To You” and wrote:

“Our beloved respectable army would never do such thing, and if they actually did, the girl deserves it. If she were responsible and respectable enough, she wouldn’t leave her house during this unstable phase of our country. Not only that but she’s actually causing the chaos. People are spreading this video when our country doesn’t need this right now, we have other priorities to be thinking of at the moment.”

Similarly, “Looking For Independence” used a verse from the Quran to justify why the young lady was responsible for what happened to her.

“God said in his holy book “Remain in your homes with dignity.” Verses from the Quran and some of the words of the Prophet Mohammed (Peace be upon him) show what this girl did was obviously the wrong thing to do. If this girl imagined the amount of chaos and danger outside, she would realize that this place isn't suitable for a woman, she wouldn't have gotten her clothes torn, and none of this would have actually happened.”

Dedy's denial of the army's involvement is associated with popular conspiracy theory that the picture or video captured was a forgery; critical of the fact that a Reuters' photographer originally recorded it. In addition, the main perpetrator of the event is wearing a slightly different colored uniform and running shoe, opposed to the combat boots usually adorned by soldiers. Nevertheless, as a result of culturally imposed definitions of modesty, respectability, and femininity, the two users critiqued the event by questioning why the woman was present at the public demonstration at all, thereby challenging her innocence.

The ‘blue bra girl’ was fairly unique in that she remained anonymous as her story was disseminated throughout Egypt and the world. She has no voice, face, or personality except for those ascribed to through social interaction and evolving public discourses found on and offline. In this particular case, due the sociocultural practices created by Egypt's neo-patriarchal history, many individuals de-victimized the woman for being in a that public because she was not reproducing or performing the expectant behavioral patterns of conduct attributable to women and their roles in Egyptian society. The

question of “Why was she there?” is the same type of rhetoric used months earlier surrounding Samira Ibrahim and the virginity tests.

Sexual Objectification: Samira Ibrahim & The Virginity Test

On March 8, 2011 Samira Ibrahim and six other women were subjected to virginity tests. To justify the virginity tests conducted, an anonymous SCAF general came forward and explained that the military did not want the women detained by the state to argue that they were raped or sexually assaulted. In a statement reported by CNN the general revealed that the military, “wanted to prove they weren't virgins in the first place. The girls who were detained were not like your daughter or mine.” This explanation endeavors to illustrate that women who partake in demonstrations against state authority are somehow immoral and unchaste. These tests were rationalized based on preconceived ideas about the victims’ moral integrity because they were exhibiting ‘indecent’ practices for a woman and thus engendering subversive spaces.

Moreover, the diction found throughout these discourses is meaningful. Language can be biased and terms are often more normalized than others indicating a linguistic hegemony that emerges from the dominant sociopolitical practices. Selective terms become standard because they are conditioned by the rational-critical logistics of a particular discourse, creating the possibility to interpret social reality according to dominant frameworks (Aouragh 2008). By claiming that ‘no respectful daughter,’ would participate in a political demonstration, SCAF’s representative created an image of what a daughter

should be and at the same time discouraged empathy between the collective and the victims. Consequently, this encouraged the famed question, “Why was she there?”

Social mediated publics played an important role as a tool to challenge these prevailing discourses by constructing new sociopolitical practices. Indeed, in an interview with Samir he told me he reposted the video because “mainstream media don’t want to talk about it. They don’t want to talk about this situation, and only two newspapers did until now, just to talk about how she lost the case.” Without the liminal spaces located in the Internet where debates, ideas, and events can be circulated and discussed, many would not have known Ibrahim’s full story.

Nevertheless, similar notions of Ibrahim’s innocence and honor were questioned in online spaces. For example, under Ibrahim’s full testimony uploaded by TahrirDiaries on YouTube, RG4ever88 said:

“Sorry but I have a question. What made her go all the way to the soldiers and the officers? Was it to just tease them and annoy them? I’m sorry people, but we know that God doesn’t accept such stuff. Its forbidden and her family shouldn’t have let her grow up thinking its okay for her to leave the house so she can go down to the streets and fight for freedom. Is there any dad or brother or mom who accepts this from their daughter?”

This commentary not only references religion to support their claim, but also generalizes that families within Egypt would not accept protesting and activism as a suitable practice from women. Other individuals, however, counter these types of comments by leaving encouraging messages. For example, mrmohammad1112 stated, “You’re a girl with the

strength of a hundred men. Forget about any jerk or dog who insults you.” Indeed, four other individuals approved of the comment, by ‘liking it,’ an action used to give positive feedback.

Perhaps then, the ultimate liminal space is facilitated by communicative technologies. This liminality illustrates that online publics are not mere reflections of social configurations, but are spaces in which normative practices are contested and challenged. Social media has been beneficial, in that it allows mass dissemination of images and rhetoric to invoke political consciousness. Even with the varied manifestations that the body carries, re-representation of gender in politics is vital in deconstructing social and political practices that are seen as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’. In other words, political actors are able to circulate images and discourses about women online in order to make claims through events that become symbolically representative of their beliefs.

The two examples of Samira Ibrahim and the ‘girl in the blue bra’ are two incidents that occurred offline and then were distributed and publicized online in order to create awareness. These events shed light on the unjust practices that de-victimize women for not performing their gender ‘correctly’ by participating in a ‘masculine’ space. It was also a trigger for many offline activities: laws suits, demonstrations, meetings, parties and collective statement issued, etc. Thus, the actions inflicted onto their bodies became symbolic instruments of political power by engendering debates about particular social configurations. In other words, discourses about these two women become symbolic representations of gender roles and statuses, in which individuals challenged or supported

the patriarchal values that govern them. These discussions are not just idle means of participation, but are effective in influencing the political atmosphere found within Egypt's publics.

As more political actors travel through cyberspace, it is important to understand how social media contributes to the access of citizenry, representation, and publicity. In many countries there is an ongoing struggle between images and discourses about women and gender relations. Another strategy for political actors to employ is to develop user-generated content in which women represent themselves and use communication technologies as tools of democratizations, to foster diversity and participation blocked by the dominating sociopolitical practices in Egypt. In the next section I trace how two Egyptian women chose to represent themselves in influencing social change by working within spaces found online to mold the boundaries of gender roles offline.

(En)Gendering Female Bodies in Online Spaces

Access to various publics within Egypt is still contested due to the male-dominated social and religious powers established by state authority (Skalli 2006). Although women's exclusion and marginalization are often institutionalized (Ibid:36), women are producing and circulating alternative discourses and images about themselves to redefine gender roles and question the sociopolitical, economic, and cultural apparatus that regulates their activities. Nevertheless, entrance into new emerging publics does not necessarily transform the gender systems and biases of sociocultural practices. Both political actors

and overarching ideologies use these discourses and images about women to re(define) women's realities. Thus, despite the space the Internet yields for social and political discourse, there remains a challenge of impeding the negative stereotypes of women that circulates in media due to normalized practices of the symbolic deployment of women. Because of these restrictions and epithets- women especially- look to new interventions and alliances to improve their realities (Ibid:39). Social media is one such outlet individuals have used to influence public formations.

Unlike traditional media, which positioned users as receivers, political actors who engage with the visual applications of social media, must consciously construct an identity for others to evaluate. Moreover, by projecting their bodies in online liminal spaces, their identity is exposed to the various interpretations of their bodies. In both offline and online spaces:

“that which underlies interaction and the meaning of human relationship is always the body. It is the first object of observation and imitation through art, but also the first measure of space and the first form of active and passive power. It exerts power and suffers it through the construction of symbolic apparatuses, and it is soon distinguished into the offline body and the political-symbolic body.” (Verdi 2010:100)

The body then, is a vehicle for both passive and active political authority, capable of augmenting rhetoric power and social control. Social media has allowed the body to escape external and internal power structures by allowing anonymity and new constructions of identity in order for the online body to become an emblem of mediated power (Verdi 2010).

While individuals' bodies may be located in approved publics, his or her agency and (perhaps) images are located in liminal and publically accessible digital spaces. To illustrate the political authority and symbolic significance of discourses and imagery created online, I convey how high profile activists Aliaa elMahdy and Asmaa Mahfouz used the gender aspect of their identity to challenge societal configurations and alter the political atmosphere. How each individual performs their gender while simultaneously challenging gendered practices is worthy of discussion. Although an interview with these activists would have helped understand the production of their user-generated content, attempts to arrange interviews were either unanswered or demanded monetary payment.

Projecting the Body: #nudephotorevolutionary

On October 23, 2011 Aliaa Magda Elmahdy posted nude photos of herself on her blog to protest violence, racism, sexism, sexual harassment and hypocrisy. In her most famous photo in which her hair bow and shoes are highlighted in red against a black and white photo, yellow rectangles censor different parts of her body. Yet, the focus of the image rests upon her naked flesh. On her Facebook account she stated:

“The yellow rectangles on my eyes, mouth and sex organ resemble the censoring of our knowledge, expression and sexuality. I have the right to live freely in any place... I feel happy and self satisfied when I feel that I'm really free.”

Often associated with freedom, some political actors use the naked flesh to challenge the constraints and demands imposed on the body by social authority. Particularly, Baumeister argues that nudity has the effect of erasing social signifiers and promoting

equality. He stated, “just the act of removing one’s clothes can help strip away symbolic identity and work roles, allowing one to become merely a body” (1991:38). However due to the sociocultural practices of Egypt, and the position of the Internet as being embedded within the normalized structures of society, becoming merely a body is an illusion. While bodies undoubtedly materialize in different shapes and sizes, interpretations of the body will always depend on the sociopolitical context.

For many participants of this study, Elmahdy’s photo did not help with the struggle against social injustices. Samir explained to me, “There’s just something in the Egyptian mind throughout history...you cannot treat Egyptian people by shock system. What Aliaa did was use her right to shock the Egyptian society. And I think it harmed herself because in a conservative society you can’t do this.” In response to the negative feedback she received because of her political action, she stated on her blog account:

“Put on trial the artists' models who posed nude for art schools until the early 70s, hide the art books and destroy the nude statues of antiquity, then undress and stand before a mirror and burn your bodies that you despise to forever rid yourselves of your sexual hang-ups before you direct your humiliation and chauvinism and dare to try to deny me my freedom of expression.”

Under this context, Elmahdy indicated that the naked body is relegated to certain areas because it denies naturalization through gender production as well as social and cultural practices. It is this reason that Elmahdy used her body to reject socially prescribed hierarchies to demonstrate the individual’s capability and power to reject any system of control. Although sociocultural practices are important in determining how nude

performances are received, they are not stable and “it is unclear to what extent they are actually transformed by the very performances, which they are presumed to constrain” (Jones 2010).

Nevertheless, it was Elmahdy’s political gesture marked by her unguarded body that has been described by herself and supporters, as a protest against discrimination in Egypt. In other words, the public performance of nudity- found within the liminal space of the Internet- challenge the dominant ideology of patriarchy in Egypt.

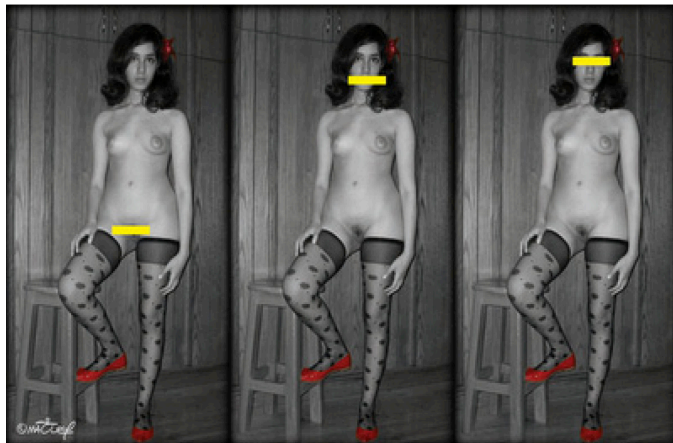


Figure 3.2
“Nude Aliaa El Mahdy” Picture taken from:
<http://arebelsdiary.blogspot.com/search?updated-max=2011-11-22T23:07:00%2B02:00&max-results=7&start=7&by-date=false>

Although Elmahdy clearly defied sociocultural gender practices with her exhibition, other activists challenged norms by staying within the boundaries of social configurations. For example, the political activism of Asmaa Mahfouz is accredited by many online activists as well as news agencies (The New York Times, Gulf News, Daily News Egypt, BBC) as sparking the protests that began in mid January in Egypt. Her political rhetoric produced and disseminated on YouTube worked within the confines of patriarchal values to encourage people to protest. The point of illustrating Mahfouz’s methodology is not to

oppose Elmahdy's tactics, but are used to illustrate the different ways in which women negotiate and perform their genders.

Bending Boundaries: Asmaa Mahfouz

Asmaa Mahfouz's fame as an Egyptian activist was acquired when her YouTube video went viral, stating her intent to attend Tahrir Square on the 25th of January.

"If you think yourself a man, come with me on 25 January. Whoever says women shouldn't go to protests because they will get beaten let him have some honor and manhood and come with me on 25 January. Whoever says it is not worth it because there will only be a handful of people, I want to tell him, you are the reason behind this, and you are a traitor, just like the president or any security cop who beats us in the streets."

Although Mahfouz does not shy away from offline activism, she utilized social media as a liminal space to encourage individuals into taking a stand against Hosni Mubarak and his regime. Her rhetoric challenged the 'manhood' and 'honor' of individuals, particularly, those who had not yet taken political action. By appealing to normative gender patterns within Egypt, Mahfouz negotiated her understanding of being a woman by consciously appealing to men to promote political activity in Tahrir Square.

Scholars such as Singerman (1996), and Abu Lughod (1993) have studied the relationship between ideal kinship structures- commonly defined as an extended patrilineal network- and the reality of everyday life (Singerman 1996). In particular, these scholars offer an analysis on how men and women perform expectant behavioral

patterns to accomplish specific ends. According to Singerman (1996), the expectant behavioral patterns act as boundaries, but malleable ones. For example, women may appeal to the duty of men in their families to protect women as a way of getting what they want (Singerman 1996). In this context, women's behaviors are not just "false consciousness of the internalization of patriarchal norms through socialization" (Mahmood 2005:6). Women are constantly and knowingly pushing the boundaries to create alternate practices in their daily lives.

The paradox of Mahfouz calling upon men to become political actors in Tahrir conveys how Mahfouz reinvents ideas about women, to challenge stereotypes and ultimately impact the political field. She is one of many who have worked in and outside the confines of gender determinism to participate in a multiplicity of public sites. By stating, "Whoever says women shouldn't go to protests because they will get beaten let him have some honor and manhood and come with me on 25th of January," she not only challenges men through her rhetoric of 'man hood' and 'honor,' but acknowledges Egypt's overall conception of women, their assigned characteristics, and positions in society. This type of activism is provocative in that it works within the boundaries of patriarchy, which rely on gendered performativity to reinforce its values.

Later that summer, Mahfouz was faced with a military prosecution for inciting violence via social media. Although the case was eventually dropped, her actions can be seen more subtle and symbolic rather than radical. Her impact on Egypt's landscape conveys that women and their differing semiologies of body are not subcategories, but are intrinsically

part of the demands of social justice and democracy (Gole 1997). This is no more apparent than the different ways Aliaa Elmahdy and Asmaa Mahfouz used their body and gender to promote and advocate campaigns against gender inequality. The inequality women face are not merely carried over into online communities, but are vigorously countered and employed in a way those political actors cannot in publics offline.

Conclusion

With the emergence of social media, gender and social relations are beginning to shift within various publics that are yet to be fully understood. According to Radsch (2007), online activity has blurred the line between private and public spheres in patriarchal countries because “personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings become the grist of [the] public” (45). Thus, “scholars and policymakers should adopt a more nuanced view of new media’s role in democratization and social change, one that recognizes that new media can have both positive and negative effects” (Aday et al. 2011:3).

These two examples compel us to think about the ways in which women themselves interact with communicative technologies and how their struggles unfold. On the one hand, political actors fighting for women’s democracy target state institutions so that they are cognizant of the economic opportunities that can be achieved from gender equality. On the other hand, political actors also target individuals so that their goal is legitimized and/or acknowledged through participation (Skalli 2006:49). This type of research on women in Middle East and North Africa indicates that communicative technologies are

beginning to have an affect on social and gender formations (Weaver 2004:139). The sociopolitical transformations that occurred in Egypt were not only tied to the ways women and their bodies are conceptualized but also connected to how women performed their gender in the confines of those limitations. Political actor's initiatives have the capability to significantly transform the gendered nature of publics, if communicative technologies are used to its greatest potential; not as a replacement for offline activism, but in conjunction with it (Skalli 2006:50).

V. CONCLUSION: PUBLIC CONTENTION

“Women not only bend the rules, but over time construct new social realities and, by so doing, in effect change the rules altogether.” -Julia Droeber

When I was in a taxi a few months ago I- ashamedly-was nervous entering inside a particular taxi. Anti-American sentiment was rising again and I was in the back seat of a taxi where the driver was listening to a debate about American involvement. He wore a *kufi*, a brimless, short, and rounded cap, had a prominent *zabiba*, or prayer callous, and a thick salt and pepper beard. Having lived in Cairo for three years, I couldn't fathom why all of a sudden I was restless; perhaps it was all the political ambiguity around me, I couldn't know for sure. But the man just sat there quietly, waiting patiently for the traffic to let up. He turned down the volume to a prayer he was listening to and looked at me through the rear view window asking me why I was here, in his country. As we started to converse, I was surprised that the hour-long taxi drive produced an enthralling conversation about Islam, Christianity, Judaism, saints and prophets, political parties and women.

Me: Do you remember that woman in Tahrir Square that was assaulted. Her clothes were ripped off...

Taxi Driver: Yes.

Me: What did you think about that?

Taxi Driver: Well this is not Islam; this is the wrongdoing of people, but she shouldn't have been there.

Me: Why do people keep saying this?

Taxi Driver: Why? I will tell you. In Egypt, we as men have to provide and protect for the mother, the wife, and the daughters. So why would you go to such demonstrations where it is crowded and the conditions are bad. Stay in the home! I drive this taxi so that my family can be safe.

Me: But women have helped the revolution in many ways....

Taxi Driver: Listen, I am a man, and *I want* to be in the house! [laughs warmly].

While, the older man was jesting about his preference to be in the home as opposed the physical publics easily accessible by him, his statement gestured to the way patriarchal dynamics shape mentalities about gender roles. Neo-patriarchal nation-states expand and establish normative views of women and the family (Moghadam 2003:130). Countries that legitimize authority based on patriarchal structures extend kinship values to legislation, making it legal to treat women as different entities than men.

On the other hand, in her research about piety movements in Cairo, Mahmood illustrates that women attempt to mold their lives in relation to their faith. Research that focuses on women's agency elucidates that women are aware of their actions and decisions within patriarchal structures (Mahmood 2005). While this may convey that women aren't just passive members of society, it has also been used to explain that a woman's (girl in the blue bra) presence in Tahrir Square is exhibiting inappropriate behavior. Consequently, the ways women work within kinship values and gender identity develops in new and interesting ways.

Many women and men have used social media as tools to contribute to political dialogues in Egypt. This vehicle is important because it has the possibility to induce social change

through education, engagement, and empowerment. It provides a safer platform for all individuals to express themselves, but not completely safe as Samir noted because even, “Asmaa Mahfouz got tried because of her cyber-activism.”

Theories about revolution should thus focus on the individuals and their tools, inasmuch that their culture, agencies, and how they protect said agencies, are part of what creates revolutionary processes. These actions confront certain limits that structures engender, in particular, as women challenge gendered structures as the political landscapes in Egypt shift. The constructed formulas of normative gender behavior in Egypt are intertwined with patriarchal values and contingent on wider sociopolitical forces that are continuously shaped by political actors.

By examining the different online and offline spaces in Egypt, this research argued that dialectical relationship exists between social media and politicized publics. In order to convey this I reviewed the dynamics of the publics found within Egypt. These publics not only depend on the constructions of gender to constitute its inclusivity, but also are colored with patriarchal values that reinforce gender productions and hierarchy.

Frequently, disenfranchised groups are barred from participating in these publics due to the overarching sociopolitical practices of a dominating ideology. Although there are many groups that could be analyzed, because of time constraints and the scope of this research I only focused on women.

Some scholars have differentiated between types of publics (Warner 2002, Cody 2010). For example, publics found online engage with new types of media, such as blogs, social networking sites, e-mails, chat rooms, etc. Publics created offline typically engage with more traditional forms of media such as newspapers, posters, books, advertisements, etc. Even so, with the increase in technology, distinctions between these publics aren't especially helpful. These publics are often times not so much as distinct as they are overlapping and in conversation with one another.

This is important because it confronts a serious issue within anthropology that treats alternative media and its contents as peripheral to culture. Images and discourses produced or distributed online can be analyzed as social artifacts. Furthermore, it illustrates how people are de(constructing) and challenging societal configurations.

Although some scholars argue that discourses and participation found online have little impact on civil society, I agree with scholars such as Wheeler (2006) and Salmon, Fernandez, & Post (2010) who believe that if wielded to its greatest potential it could effectively alter the political atmosphere. Social change does not only develop as a result of political consciousness, but also because of technological advancements. To make this point I engaged with five participants who described why they believed social media to be an important tool in affecting the political atmosphere. Through their narratives and reflections they negotiate their understanding of activism and political participation.

In addition, they convey how distinctions of online and offline spaces are increasingly becoming blurred by referencing four major events involving women. By engaging with images and discourses about women I showed that they are frequently used as structuring elements, which is crucial in defining the malleability of a public's boundaries. The case events of Samira Ibrahim and the 'blue bra girl' illustrate how events that transpired offline were redistributed and disseminated online to enter political discourse. The ways in which people engaged with these two events highlight how patriarchal values and gendered practices carry over to liminal spaces, or spaces that lie beyond the control of the state. Because Samira Ibrahim was able to document her testimony and upload it in the confines of social media, military officials were forced to take steps to appease Egypt's outrage. This pressure eventually led to the ban of virginity tests in military compounds. On the other hand, the blue bra event- real or not- was not only the impetus of a march that occurred three days later, and the inspiration for revolutionary slogans (women are the red line), but it also forced people to think about how they view women's access to certain publics. Their bodies became symbolic instruments of political power by creating debates about particular social configurations. The dialogue found online is important because it allows more unguarded expressions to emerge which might not otherwise transpire due to the dominating social practices that have a strong hold on the way people think about women and their roles.

The second set of examples conveys how women themselves used social media to participate politically during the Egyptian revolution. Their media was produced and distributed with the sole intent to engender political dialogue about women's right to

represent themselves and participate in political affairs. Aliaa Elmahdy's gesture was projected into a liminal space instead of creating a subversive one. This is important because without access to this space, it is doubtful that such a gesture offline would be viewed as political. Because the action was projected into a liminal space the gesture became propaganda for many Islamists parties who asserted that a secular country would produce more deeds like this and would lead to the moral decline of the country. Asmaa Mahfouz, however, took a different approach to participate and alter the political landscape. She did this by acknowledging the fact that many would suggest she shouldn't be in a public where political participation is transgressing against government rule. By using gendered practices such as demanding men to come and protect her while she protested, she provoked many into taking political action. These two examples, force us to reflect on how individuals are using technology as well as their gender identity to affect and challenge gender formations.

Thus, as the world progresses in technology, the Internet, and the user-generated content found within social media, needs to be analyzed as another type of social artifact. I believe that future research should take a more nuanced account of communicative technology and its political qualities as well as its capabilities in transforming gender relations.

Why Women?

Women, as a conceptual tool is problematic because it can't effectively account for the multiplicity of cultural, social, and political identities that constitutes an individual. And

yet, it is a category frequently used politically and symbolically to represent various convictions. Attempts to explain why women are exercised as crucial structuring elements within society is largely unanswerable. But perhaps we can think about this inquiry as it relates to gender construction.

As one of the many social institutions, gender is one of the ways in which humans understand and organize their lives (Lorber 1994). Society depends on organization to divide labor, allocate goods, assign responsibility for elders and youths, etc. An ideal way of choosing people to fulfill specific roles in society would be to base them on their talent, motivations, desires, and achievements. Other methods of organizing society are through gender, race, ethnicity, class, and other forms of membership. Although every society is different when it comes to organizing social structures, gender classifications are always found and legitimized through religion, law, science, and society's normative practices.

When gender is used as a structure of inequality, the subordinate gender typically has less power, prestige, and economic rewards (Ibid). Consequently, gender inequality that devalues 'women' and elevates men's status and domination is a reflection of the social function and history of that society, not the result of physiology or hormones. Gender is a production that is maintained by social processes and performances, and embedded into the social structure of every day lives deliberately and purposefully.

In Egypt for example, during the early days of the revolution, men and women stood side by side protesting against Hosni Mubarak's regime. Although many revered Tahrir square to be a democratic hub during the initial 18 days, women's presence and gender equality was a meaningful and functional guise to mobilize a specific agenda: usurp Hosni Mubarak. Their presence became meaningful inasmuch that individuals altered normalized gendered practices in order to form a greater constituency. After Mubarak's impeachment, women were frequently mistreated and barred from participating politically because they engendered women's issues, which were considered by many to be subsidiary. The justification that women must be sheltered and protected in order to preserve their sanctity became an easy strategy to explain why women were relegated back to the private sphere after Mubarak was overthrown. In this sense, the possible liberation of women threatens not only men's position of dominance, but also men's capability to control the terms of the revolution, as well as society.

Thus, perhaps the purpose of gender as a social construction coincides with how men police society's publics. In other words, because men dominate positions of authority, images and discourses about women are used to reestablish the power men have in controlling the social production of women's behaviors and practices. Although this explanation may be too simplistic and straightforward, it might shed some light as to why women are frequently used as symbols in social and political affairs.

Final Reflections

I wanted to write about social media and its capabilities because it became such a buzzword during the revolution. Everyone seemed to think that engagement with social media was the reason the so-called Arab Spring finally transpired. But just as soon as it became the next new thing, it was stripped of its power and everyone wanted to retract their statements. Of course social media cannot bring about revolutions. If that was the thought process then just think of all the time, energy, and money we could save fighting wars online.

But I could not shake the feeling that social media was beginning to affect the world in new ways. Just think, a repost of Mickey and Minnie Mouse from a Coptic Christian businessman created such an uproar during the revolution, that just the mere act of reposting infuriated people and worsened sectarian strife in Egypt. So I wanted to understand if there was a relationship between the online and offline world, how did it work? And if it did work, why were people suggesting that social media didn't affect the political field? Therefore, I tried to illustrate the ways in which online spaces and offline spaces overlap each other by focusing on the discourses and images from women and about women. With this project, I hope to have added a better understanding of social media's capabilities in influencing and engendering political action.

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