



# FROM PASSION TO ACTIVISM?

The Politics, Communications and Creativity  
of Participatory Networks  
in the MENA Region

A large crowd of people at a protest or rally, many holding red, white, and black flags. In the foreground, a man is holding a megaphone, and another man is playing a drum. The scene is filled with energy and movement.

SHAKUNTALA BANAJI  
CRISTINA MORENO ALMEIDA

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Wydad Casablanca's Ultras

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# From Passion to Activism? – The Politics, Communications and Creativity of Participatory Networks in the MENA Region

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## Abstract

This paper argues that while platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are unquestionably allowing some young citizens in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region quicker, easier and greater access to job opportunities and likeminded groups and citizens inside and outside the region, class-based digital divides exist, scepticism of new media remains, online surveillance and harassment are rife, and social media fatigue is common. Existing community structures, creativity and emerging media remain important for youth participatory civic networks in Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Communities, local neighbourhoods, private and public spaces, and commercial media cultures vie for position in young people's social worlds and civic identities. Young Emiratis, expats, Jordanians, Jordanian Palestinians, Moroccans and Tunisians practice their political values and social relationships in networks that are strongly inflected by social class and gender. Indigeneity, race and sexuality also inflect the cultural histories and practices on which young people in the region draw. Individual charisma, self-exploitation, arts and crafts, old media tools and local friendship or kinship networks are still the basis for much civic solidarity, political trust, critique and creative dissemination in the MENA region. This has profound implications for technologically oriented protest narratives, for discussions of personalisation, and for democracy.

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## Introduction

Animated by debates about whether and how new and emerging media and social media platforms are altering communication, culture and community amongst young people aged 15 to 35 in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region, the research project on which this paper draws set out to contextualise the role of older more embedded media forms, such as graffiti and television, and the role of offline communities of practice in networked participation. In this paper, we focus on four countries, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which exemplify contrasting histories and types of governance, and variable internet penetration rates and population income levels. We do so guided by two interlinked research questions: First, *what kinds of community networks, participatory cultures and civic engagements are exhibited by the youth populations of Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia and the UAE?* And second, *has the availability of new media altered existing participatory cultural networks, affordances and civic spaces?* These questions focus on the ways in which communities of young citizens interact with each other and with civic and political cultures across the four countries. They aim to investigate the depth, avenues for, and types of participation, as well as the meanings and constraints on different types of networks, and the significance or irrelevance of class and gender in conceptualising networked participation in the contrasting MENA countries.

All our chosen countries have a significant urban population, a high number of university graduates and relatively substantial levels of technology access (indicated here by internet users: Jordan 53.4 percent, Morocco 57.1 percent, Tunisia 48.5 percent and UAE 91.2 percent).<sup>1</sup> Politically, however, the four countries show relevant differences. While Morocco and Jordan have similar political systems of ruling monarchies and elected parliaments with limited powers, Tunisia is transitioning from the authoritarian rule of Ben Ali following the Arab Spring, and the UAE is a federal presidential monarchy governed by ruling elites. The UAE, with an annual gross domestic product (GDP) of \$377 billion,<sup>2</sup> can be regarded as a high-income country despite the fact that it is also home to a large number of exploited foreign workers whose wages do not correspond to this data.

Given this diversity of contexts, we designed our research in iterative cycles to include fact checking, analysis of existing statistics on participation and internet use in the region, and critical literature reviews. Desk research was intentionally interspersed with and challenged by field research, and methodological encounters with our research assistants (RAs) and other key scholars in the field. Our four young RAs in the region attended an intensive three-day methodological and ethics training workshop in London. During this period, we focused on training them in qualitative research practice as well as on discussing political and ethical contexts. Banaji's experience doing ethnographic work with children and

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<sup>1</sup> 'Internet Users (per 100 people)', *UNdata* (2015). Available at [http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?d=WDI&f=Indicator\\_Code%3AIT.NET.USER.P2](http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?d=WDI&f=Indicator_Code%3AIT.NET.USER.P2).

<sup>2</sup> *The World Bank Data* (2015). Available at <http://data.worldbank.org/country/united-arab-emirates>.

youth in India and Europe<sup>3</sup> and Moreno Almeida's work with rappers in Morocco and her knowledge of the region's cultural scenes<sup>4</sup> provided fruitful models for the training.

Between September 2016 and March 2017, our RAs collected in-depth qualitative data with the aim of shedding light on the national, local and regional contexts of new media linked to participation, creativity and networking. Interview questions focused on the depth and types of participation in civil, religious, political and other networks offline, and the extent to which emerging digital platforms can be – or already are – transforming young people's identities as performers, artists, activists and citizens. Our research was planned around a series of contrasting ethnographic case studies. Each study illustrates the peculiarities of an organically connected or diffuse set of young people involved in an overtly or covertly political cause, artistic production, popular social movement or social enterprise that uses both old and new media for communication and connection. These cases include: football ultras, a teacher trainees' union, Sufi music performers and members from the film scene in Morocco; cultural networks and spaces, a mobile bookshop, refugees and metal music networks in Jordan; feminists, LGBTQI, #manich\_msamah movement, and gamers' networks in Tunisia; and motorbike networks, musical and theatrical ventures, counselling and self-disclosure and digital podcasting networks in the UAE. All the cases emerged out of a systematic mapping of the civic spheres in each country through literature searches as well as on and offline discussions. Civic network diagrams were created which charted connections between different offline and online communities, and *demonstrated the prevalence of particular nodes and networks*; as such, these chosen networks exemplify the breadth of different social and cultural practices engaged in by young people in intergenerational grouping across the four countries. Space restrictions entail that we discuss only one case per country. In the cases that follow our brief literature review, we draw from data which includes field notes, digitally recorded individual or group interviews, photographs, artefacts, leaflets, flyers, music and other material provided by our many participatory networks. Before turning to four indicative cases drawn from this rich archive of data, we interrogate existing literature to shed light on the national, local and regional contexts, as well as the conceptual backdrop of this study.

<sup>3</sup> Shakuntala Banaji, *Reading 'Bollywood': The Young Audience and Hindi Films* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Shakuntala Banaji, *Children and Media in India: Narratives of Class, Agency and Social Change* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016); Shakuntala Banaji and David Buckingham, *The Civic Web: Young People, the Internet and Civic Participation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Cristina Moreno Almeida, 'Unravelling Distinct Voices in Moroccan Rap: Evading Control, Weaving Solidarities, and Building New Spaces for Self-Expression', *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 25/3 (2013), pp. 319–332; Cristina Moreno Almeida, 'Race' and 'Blackness' in Moroccan Rap: Voicing Local Experiences of Marginality', in Alex Lubin and Marwan M. Kraïdy (eds), *American Studies Encounters the Middle East* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), pp. 81–105; Cristina Moreno Almeida, 'The Politics of Taqlidi Rap: Reimagining Moroccanness in the Era of Global Flows', *The Journal of North African Studies* 21/1 (2016), pp. 116–131; Cristina Moreno Almeida, 'Reporting on Selective Voices of 'Resistance': Secularism, Class and 'Islamist' Rap', *International Journal of Cultural Studies* (2017), pp. 1–16.



## Spaces for Everyday Youth Participation: Governmentality, Patronage and the Festivalisation of Culture

In Tunisia, Morocco and the UAE, the state – headed by monarchies in the case of the latter two – is a major patron of the arts.<sup>5</sup> This investment includes support not only of music, cinema and theatre, but also of sports. According to Amara's study,<sup>6</sup> the Maghreb<sup>7</sup> actively promotes sports for a variety of reasons, including social control and the promotion of patriotism. In Morocco, culture is supported through foundations and associations, as well as through the Ministry of Culture. These cultural foundations are headed by prominent members of the *makhzen* (the Moroccan elite), as is the case with the Association Maroc Culture in charge of organising the Mawazine Festival, the largest music festival in the country. In this way, the monarchy is able to control the field of culture – including its main ideas and motifs and its winners and losers – while presenting itself as a supporter of the arts. The state's promotion of arts and sport is thus directly linked to cultural control of both elite and common cultural symbols and fields. By being the major patron of the arts, the state ensures the selection of sportspeople and cultural stakeholders that will be funded, thus defining the cultural narrative. Here we have a clear instantiation of the working of hegemony, as outlined by Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*.<sup>8</sup> Civil society is ruled through a form of cultural control that wins consent from a majority of the population to the strategic priorities and ideological views and needs of the ruling elites. In the process, the ideas and beliefs of the majority are shaped, without direct coercion, and space for dissent or revolution diminishes. Music and sports are organised through large yearly events that grant visibility to the patrons but fail to promote everyday participation.

Taieb Belghazi uses the concept of the 'festivalisation' of urban spaces to argue that Moroccan authorities and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have turned to organising festivals as a major component in their cultural policy.<sup>9</sup> These festivals serve both to mark the cultural field and to attract tourists via an invitation to indulge in spectacle. Attempts at reproducing cultural hegemony are clearly evidenced through music festivals in Morocco, which are typically supervised by figures close to the state.<sup>10</sup> Further, social class plays a notable role in the ways in which access to festivals is divided. While some venues are unaffordable to the majority of the population, other events take place

<sup>5</sup> Fadma Ait Mous and Mohamed Wazif, 'Summer Festivals in Morocco: International Influence and a Factor of Social Cohesion', *IEMed Yearbook* (2008), pp. 295–299; Said Graiouid and Taieb Belghazi, 'Cultural Production and Cultural Patronage in Morocco: The State, the Islamists, and the Field of Culture', *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 25/3 (2013), pp. 261–274.

<sup>6</sup> Mahfoud Amara, *Sport, Politics and Society in the Arab World* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> The Maghreb includes Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Mauritania and Libya.

<sup>8</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 1975).

<sup>9</sup> Taieb Belghazi, 'Festivalization of Urban Space in Morocco', *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 15/1 (2006), pp. 97–107 at pp. 101–102.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102; Moreno Almeida, 'Unravelling Distinct Voices in Moroccan Rap', p. 320.

in public squares where attendance is free.<sup>11</sup> Such a use of urban spaces ensures the presence of large numbers, increasing the visibility of the event. At the same time, it raises the question of *whether mere attendance constitutes participation*, and if the answer is yes, divides this apparent participation across socio-economic classes. Showing the success of such hegemonising strategies, festivals are in general well-received by the majority of the local population, as these yearly events are a time where urban spaces are transformed into cultural venues.

There is general agreement among scholars that civil society organisations in the MENA region are often used by states as a tool for social control.<sup>12</sup> Regimes closely monitor civil society organisations, favouring those that help build the state's desired image and disseminate its agenda. Indeed, while our case studies of young activists explore groups that champion non-aligned and independent thought and action in the arenas of music, football, gender and cultural production, even many women's organisations in the region exemplify a co-opted relationship with either the state or religious authority. Indeed, according to Krause<sup>13</sup> '[t]he state's use of women's organisations as a device of governmentality<sup>14</sup> is a phenomenon across the Middle East'. In our experience, women's networks in the UAE were reluctant to relate to us other than through state-sanctioned routes, for fear of surveillance. But what of other arenas for participation, cultural networks, especially in sport? Are these too almost entirely the domain of external control and managed participation? And how do young people negotiate and build counter-hegemonic positions with respect to cultural spaces, and their favourite games and music genres?

## Independent Youth Networks as Civic Cultures

### Jordan: Cultural Spaces

As discussed above, spectacular once-a-year events promoted by the state for tourism and soft power purposes fail to engage young people at neighbourhood level, or to invest in talent. Jordanian theatre festivals suffer from the same curse of state intervention. Several yearly theatre festivals have become part of the cultural ecology of Jordan. The Jerash Festival for Culture and the Arts, founded by Yarmouk University in 1981, started as

<sup>11</sup> Belghazi, 'Festivalization of Urban Space in Morocco', p. 107.

<sup>12</sup> On Morocco and Jordan see Francesco Cavatorta and Vincent Durac, *Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World: The Dynamics of Activism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001). On the UAE see Wanda Krause, *Women in Civil Society: The State, Islamism, and Networks in the UAE* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 49. On Jordan see Quintan Wiktorowicz, 'Civil Society as Social Control: State Power in Jordan', *Comparative Politics* 33/1 (2000), pp. 43–61.

<sup>13</sup> Krause, *Women in Civil Society*, p.59.

<sup>14</sup> Coined by Michel Foucault, the term 'governmentality' indicates the way a state exercises control over its population allowing the creation of 'docile bodies' within this population to be used by economic and political institutions. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House, 1977).

an independently funded festival supported by an independent non-profit organisation.<sup>15</sup> Another independently sponsored festival is the Amman International Theatre Festival, which is organised and managed by the theatre company Al Fawanees. Here, avoiding state funding is a sign of artistic and political independence – and aware of this, the state is at pains to shut down funding options. In 1999, the Amman International Theatre Festival was boycotted by the state who cited the dangers of receiving foreign (read: Israeli) funding. While both Carlson and Wilson connect the festival's boycott and cancellation with the influence of the political tension between Jordan and Israel, such a strategy also fits in with the common blueprint of states claiming control of political discourses by limiting funding of cultural events.<sup>16</sup>

The field of cultural events and spaces proves to be a fruitful ground both for the promotion of particular ideological interests and for the struggle between state and civil society over people's everyday cultural activities and beliefs. In this context, the cultural café Jadal in Amman, which neither seeks nor receives government funding, displays many attributes of offline civic participation networks. It was started by an individual, Fadi, with the aim of providing space for free thought, debate, networking and cultural critique through lectures and discussions. As he explains:

The idea came from my belief in the importance of cultural action and initiative, because I could see a kind of crisis in the consciousness of people who joined the *hirak*<sup>17</sup>... Jadal offers a space for young people to express themselves, a space for them to launch their social initiatives, and a space to build dialogue between people.

The space is used for film screenings and music events, but also simply as a space for young Jordanians, as well as Syrian and Palestinian exiles, to hang out, chat and have coffee. Here, things like critical theory could be taught to groups of up to 10 students at a time in a relaxed and respectful manner, unlike that of a 'real university'. The charismatic young people who staff the café are mainly volunteers, and herein lies the rub: without sustained funding or state funding, it places an almost impossible financial and emotional burden on its founder. Increasingly, as its reputation grows online – it is rated on TripAdvisor and has Facebook and Twitter accounts – it is becoming a hub for Western travellers; and this has perhaps pushed out some of the local patrons.<sup>18</sup> Although some of these Westerners have sympathetic political and social values, others are merely looking for a 'cool hangout' that caters to their needs. The dilemma facing civic spaces such as Jadal, then, is one of communication and community within financial insecurity. Without an organic community

<sup>15</sup> Marvin Carlson, 'Theatre Festivals in the Arab World', *Contemporary Theatre Review* 13/4 (2003), pp. 42–47 at p. 46. Available at [www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1048680032000118396](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1048680032000118396).

<sup>16</sup> The festival was in fact suspended in 1982 and 2006 because of Israeli military operations. See Kate Wilson, 'Cultural Collateral Damage: The Cancellation of Jordan's Jerash Festival 2006', *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 23/1 (2006), pp. 93–113; Carlson, 'Theatre Festivals in the Arab World', pp. 42–47.

<sup>17</sup> One of Jordan's 'Arab Spring' movements.

<sup>18</sup> At least according to some interviewees in a mobile book network, the effect of having White people in the space provided by Jadal, has been to make the space seem 'snobbish' and exclusive.

from which to draw, it needs a constant flow of customers to survive; and community-building is difficult when those who frequent the venue are transient, or uninterested in local cultural and political concerns.

## Morocco: Football and the ‘Ultras’

In sports, big events serve to entrench a generally hegemonic discourse of social and cultural development via the appearance of an investment in youth. In Morocco and Tunisia, this apparent support for sporting activities is in stark contrast to the actual economic and political actions that are put in place to bring about young people’s participation. Such contradictions cause ongoing debates on media outlets, in particular at times of global sporting events such as the Olympic Games.<sup>19</sup> An exception to the argument about a lack of independent public networks for participation is the everyday culture of football. Football matches, from professional leagues to amateurs playing in the street, take place on a regular basis. The significance of football in the political field of the MENA region may be read through the social and political power of the ultras. Ultras are football fans renowned for their ultra-fanatic support of their clubs. Their support is materialised in songs, *tifos*<sup>20</sup> and other cultural expressions. These groups are significant to our work for two reasons: first, they are an example of opportunities for everyday youth participation in the cultural field; and second, they embody unsupervised networks of participation, both from elder family members and from the state and the clubs they support. On the one hand, they normally remain economically independent from the state and thus partly avoid its control, and on the other hand they keep their distance from the clubs’ management.<sup>21</sup>

Ahmed, one of the ultras interviewed in Salé, Morocco, exemplifies the passion involved in the network’s activities surrounding his team: ‘It is impossible to like the beauty of football without loving the beauty of fans’. Sohail, another ultra, exclaims ‘the fans create the match!’, and yet another says ‘ultras are in our blood’. However, these and other interviewees from the ultras network explain that the content of the slogans, songs, banners and *tifos* are a mixture of passion for the team and political and social messaging addressing social injustice. The massive logistical preparation involved in going to matches and in assuring the safety and security of those who attend and travel together, has been made even more complex by the fact that the ultras have been recently banned in Morocco. This means that de facto the state does not distinguish between fans and hooligans. This has led the ultras groups to politically organise themselves and to boycott the matches played, even by the teams they support. Their preparations take place in multiple offline locations such as abandoned lots, factories or yards – space is needed for production of the *tifos* for each game – as well as via computer software that map out the stadium seating onto the bits of plastic to be painted by ultras with unique messages. Creativity abounds

<sup>19</sup> Amara, *Sport, Politics and Society in the Arab World*, p.83.

<sup>20</sup> *Tifo* is the Italian word for the phenomenon of supporting a sport team. Here, it is a choreography displayed by fans in the stands of an arena or stadium.

<sup>21</sup> Connor T. Jerzak, ‘Ultras in Egypt: State, Revolution, and the Power of Public Space’, *Interface* 5/2 (2013), pp. 240–262 at p. 242.

both online and offline with musicians, singers and those technologically savvy, composing and playing songs to be uploaded on YouTube; and graphic artists and computer scientists working out how to manage the huge *tifos* ahead of matches. Notably, there is a paradox to the creativity displayed that arises from the wish to dissolve the individual in the spirit of the network: Artists remain anonymous, when filmed, they wear masks, stand in the dark or have their faces digitally blurred. Not only does this protect them from surveillance, it also ensures their individual talent does not overshadow the team, the ultras and the cause. ‘Everyone is the same’, as Sohail put it.

As for the content of these messages – while they are sometimes national – their referencing of poverty, corruption and disillusionment with the ruling party, helps them resonate internationally. Mohamed, another interviewee, asserts that ‘we supported the Palestinian cause, and when Iraq was invaded, we were among the first to [protest against it]’. Large banners, with messages and symbols of different ultra groups, are now banned; without them the ultras will not enter stadia. Consequently, ‘only common people (i.e. non-ultras or ‘normal’ fans) actually watch matches live’, with a strict police presence. While the police are a much-distrusted symbol of the state, some ultras still see their presence as necessary to discourage crowd violence and unruliness. The mainstream media, however, are uniformly despised for being sensationalist and for failing to represent the views and values of ultras accurately. This creates a space for alternative YouTube channels, such as the Winners’ *Proxydotcom*, where loyal fans can get their true messages and intentions out to the world.

Of course, being political or even dissident in one way, does not mean that an organisation or network is free of prejudice in other areas, as the story of female fan Sara attests. Raised in a Wydad fans family, for her ‘supporting is a necessity’ and her passion for football and her team is undeniable: ‘What made me love the team even more is the feeling you get when you are with the fans in the stadium, if you go to the stadium you feel safe...’ However, her account also exposed the sexism of male ultras in Morocco. Women are simply not accepted as ultra members and are not allowed to officially join as members: their participation is repeatedly denigrated and policed. Fandom, such as wearing merchandise, is discouraged in public, and girls who do so can be shamed. Sara keeps in touch with her favoured team through a mix of risk-taking and invisibility. She sneaks out to stadiums and matches with family friends who agree to take her, or looks out for updates on WhatsApp, Facebook and YouTube. However, she has also managed to convince some male relatives of the significance of her participation, although she is herself somewhat elusive when asked if women should be allowed in the ultras. Sara’s account was confirmed, with neither critique nor irony, by all the male ultras interviewed. While ‘everyone is the same’ as Sohail claims, that everyone only refers to men. It also requires significant time and capital investment and a phenomenal degree of persistence, organisation and loyalty. This loyalty itself, including loyalty to values of parity between men, love of the pure game above profit, and exclusion of women who ‘weaken’ support, entails a subterranean form of governmentality that competes with that of the state.



## Tunisia: Gamers

The gaming sector in Tunisia is diffuse and unstructured. The community of gamers is dispersed, with no single group or initiative in control. Some statistics concerning games can be found on the page of the Tunisian Association of Gamers (TAG).<sup>22</sup> However, since this was gathered via Facebook questionnaires, it tends to exclude those who do not go online and have offline consoles. Getting an accurate picture of gender and age balances in this community is therefore fairly complex, compared, to the ultras for example, which have been previously documented, or to Jadal which is a small initiative. Our qualitative interviews yielded insights that are worth following up via wider surveys. If we take into account the TAG's classification of occasional gamers, active gamers and passionate gamers, it could be said that our interviewees are all active or even passionate gamers, groups which are apparently, respectively 78,000 (active gamers) and 2,000 (passionate gamers) in Tunisia.

One of our young interviewees, Aymen, a 'veteran' and professional gamer by his own account, has been playing video games for over 10 years. Having begun to play at the age of seven, he got immersed in gaming and is thinking of starting a game-related project. As a professional gamer and YouTube star,<sup>23</sup> Aymen receives sponsorship from famous gaming companies. Apart from playing games, reviewing games on YouTube, and participating in tournaments and championships, Aymen has participated in dubbing games from English to Arabic, yet another way to reach out to a wider audience. In Aymen's discussion, the wider unknown audience consists of gamers across the globe and is not limited to young people or to Tunisians. However, some of the other interviewees such as Manel suggest that offline, local gaming networks are as important to them as virtual and online ones.

Inducted into gaming at a very young age by her brother who was four years older than her, and beginning with Pokemon and World of Warcraft, Manel now plays as part of the League of Legends community: 'Sometimes we would meet and play in a cyber (café) with excellent connections and high spec computers'. Here, gender discrimination abounds and, in our view, for women and girls pushes what seem like a simple leisure pastime over the line into a form of civic action:

Maybe the hardest thing to face is actually to get into the guys' team. Most of them would say 'You are a girl. You cannot play'. Once you get into a team, they would always look at you as a girl and not as a good player... I play because I want to get good at the game as a person, as a gamer, not as a girl, but at the same time I really want to say that 'I am a girl! And I am as good as the boys...'

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<sup>22</sup> See Tunisian Association of Gamers' Website. Available at <http://tagtun.org/statistiques-sur-le-sport-en-tunisie/4/>.

<sup>23</sup> See Aymen's Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/RodnDjok/> and his Youtube channel: [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCcoPo\\_cAZxtUvWV2z2g5ILg](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCcoPo_cAZxtUvWV2z2g5ILg).

Another female interviewee, Narjakh, belongs to an online network called the Tunisian Girl Gamers (TGG). Despite being exclusively online, TGG has helped members to get to know each other, to share experiences related to gender and gaming, and to gather both online and offline with each other. The feminist collective CHAML, an online blog related to women's rights, has recently posted an article about TGG. Narjakh, as well as other girl gamers that our RA Sara spoke to, agreed that girl gamers are usually looked down at or underestimated when they play online in mixed groups. They recounted having been insulted, kicked out of a game, and verbally harassed on a gaming platform, at least once. Several mentioned a constant struggle which aligns with much global criticism of gaming communities. Nevertheless, these young women's will to prove themselves, to improve their skills as players, and to navigate game worlds appeared undimmed. And herein lies a key point that applies far more widely than just in Tunisia: youth cultural activity and civic organisation is not perfect, either online or offline.<sup>24</sup> We refute a simple culturalist argument that might identify this particular form of patriarchal control of online space or networked activity as exceptional to the MENA region, although it is clearly inflected by local gender relations. Female gamers in Tunisia are trapped within and work against similar misogynist logics to those that are present in gamer communities in Europe and North America. Even when set up to protest one kind of injustice, or to advocate equality and creativity in a particular sphere, the cultural and media production, leisure ethos and social values of particular civic networks generally reflect the conflicting contexts, struggles and prejudices of participants.

## UAE: Cultural Networks

In the UAE, the state appears to have become aware of the branding power of culture somewhat later than in the other countries researched here, as it has primarily been concerned with the tourism and construction industries.<sup>25</sup> As Syed Ali argues, the reason behind this is a lack of appreciation for 'the potential of arts as commerce and as a branding device'.<sup>26</sup> Emiratis make up only 10 percent of the population of the UAE, and despite the fact that they depend on the labour of the other 90 percent, they feel themselves 'under siege from an ever-increasing foreign majority, and find that their culture is diminishing in importance in public spaces'.<sup>27</sup> Recently, the government has turned to hosting festivals – cinema, comics, music, shopping and heritage – as a way to monitor, organise and spectacularise culture. These festivals celebrate Emirati culture and heritage including dance, music, storytelling, cookery, horse and camel-riding, as well as other themes such as chess or rock music. Here too, social class plays a key role. While open-air spaces embodied in the idea of the 'Arab street' have traditionally been considered as quintessential spaces of participation in the MENA region, in Dubai, open-air public spaces such as patches of grass are *marginal*,<sup>28</sup> while indoor malls and consumer culture

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<sup>24</sup> Banaji and Buckingham, *The Civic Web*.

<sup>25</sup> Syed Ali, *Dubai: Gilded Cage* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 66.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

embody the meeting arena of the privileged. In contrast to our other cases, in the UAE, cultural activities are organised mainly in closed private spaces reserved for the elite and aimed at branding the country for foreigners.

Nevertheless, even with the dearth of open-air spaces, there is a growing network of artists and practitioners in the UAE. Our interviews with fairly well-to-do independent musicians, music promoters, art activists and poetry slam organisers in the UAE suggest that a range of strategies and opportunities for performance are deliberately being developed outside of the state networks. Unlike the gamers in Tunisia or the ultras in Morocco, most individuals in this network stem from wealthy families, and the network itself is not 'grassroots'. Indeed, as with many other networks in the country, our research suggests that performances take place primarily within private homes, or other privately hired spaces. Since space is such a political issue and rates of internet penetration are high amongst the social groups they inhabit, all interviewees stress the significance of internet tools in allowing them to connect with, select, promote, advertise, and carefully celebrate young musicians and artists. Although their aim is ultimately to have a physical space of their own where they can be based, Sali Elagab, the co-founder of an independent and unfunded space 'The Green Room' tells us that already 'there's a community sense to the Green Room':

The Green Room is a moving platform for young independent musicians in the UAE. It showcases young artists ... [we have a set database of artists which is growing every day] and we go from one venue to another. ... We really want to nurture the music scene in Sharjah and the UAE more generally.

We note that the language here maintains an ambivalent relationship between civil society cultural production and the state's desire to brand the UAE as a nation through culture. The Green Room, while clearly not falling into the category of an organisation that hosts festivals or artists on behalf of the state, and in some ways an autonomous network in contrast to the state-sponsored activities, is also conscious of cultural production's position vis-à-vis the nation.

While their website provides their main online resource and they do sometimes get cold calls or approaches at venues, communication primarily takes place via personal email, Facebook pages – both group and personal – YouTube and Snapchat. In addition to providing venues and promotion for young musicians with no connection to the state, the Green Room also runs songwriting and performance workshops, based on people's needs or requests, as well as one-off poetry slams, performance nights and stand-up comedy. At times, they collaborate with another 'trendy' new organisation, Freshly Ground Sounds, which somewhat disingenuously promotes itself as the only 'scene' for young musicians in the UAE, and is most popular with fairly wealthy Emiratis and expats. We gathered, however, that while personal tragedy, self-reflection and social angst are explored across this scene, overtly political questions and messages are excluded from performances at the Green Room and certainly do not enter the lyrics of most artists at Freshly Ground Sounds. Most of the artists, aware of local codes, of surveillance and of other possible repercussions, either perform elsewhere or self-censor their lyrics, poetry and comedy.

In this sense, the music network scene here is quite distinct from that in European countries, or even in Morocco and Jordan. This self-censorship has implications for the connections between autonomous political or civic activism in the UAE and the state's sphere of influence: even in the rare spaces where cultural acts are not directly policed, they are to a certain extent inflected by understandings of surveillance, acceptability and risk.

## Conclusion

There is a plethora of creative energy going into building and maintaining artistic, socio-political and other cultural networks amongst young people and cross generationally in the MENA region. Across the four contrasting countries, we found civic networks and participation in arenas as diverse as cooking and political philosophy, football, gaming and LGBTQI rights. Many of the networks were clearly nested in the histories of political and civic participation of each of the countries. Notably, although we specifically interviewed young people aged between 15 and 35, several of the networks consisted of intergenerational teams or large diffuse movements (for example the ultras), and where they were uniformly involving the young, these young tended to be more homogenous in terms of social class – i.e. being primarily from high-income families and/or college-going and educated (for example Jadal and the Green Room). While new media has clearly entered the sphere of civic networks, assisting active members in communicating easily and quickly with each other, in seeking information about new members and, at times, in facilitating the central activities in crucial ways, almost all of the networks we looked at across the project and notably the ones we discuss in this paper consist of a major portion of offline interactions. In fact, the idea of physical space, either public or private, and of such space as an arena for the discussion and exhibition of political or social views and values, was central to most of the networks.

Further, analysing young people's political, artistic, sporting and musical cultures in the MENA region through the lenses of media use and participation sheds new light on the way the region's youth engage socially and politically. While there is much to emulate and admire about the networks, exclusions and hierarchies do persist in many of them, and hegemonic identities creep in. Thus, a practice, network or movement can be a progressive force in one arena, such as access to cultural production outside the state sector, while remaining a regressive force with regards to gender, social class, or religious identities. An anxiety about the commodification of the self and of civic initiatives – and about having too many dull, meaningless or negative interactions – was mentioned by some young people as being the reason why they do not use social media heavily. The ability to communicate an event or idea quickly with many was the reason that some went online despite a personal preference not to do so. Certainly, economic power stands at the intersection between media, culture and participation whether on or offline, and patriarchal gender norms that are inflected by the local contexts but not exclusive to the region remain a key barrier for young women's entry into cultural and political spaces. In the case of gender, young men appear to take on the role of policing cultural and political

spaces, which one might argue has been vacated by – or taken from – the state. This allows us to make the further point that governmentality is not something confined to governing elites or to bureaucratic structures, and that equally profound habits and effects are felt in intersubjective relationships between citizens in the MENA region.

Across the MENA region and in our four chosen countries, elites play an important role in controlling the cultural field and accumulating power through their dominant position, including with regards to national mainstream media. These elites have shown a preference for certain types of large spectacular events and cultural practices. Yet, there are instances where these elites do not – or cannot – control and organise youth participation as amongst the ultras in Morocco, alternative cultural spaces in Jordan and gamers in Tunisia. The networks examined here, while in many ways retaining the class-biased or patriarchal codes of wider society, organise themselves not only regardless of the elites' dominant power but also independent of parental supervision. In doing this, those young – sometimes working class and lower middle class – people get a chance to support their favourite football team or play in international online game tournaments, and in turn engage in different, and sometimes extreme, instances of local and national social and political issues. The different examples presented here problematise the notion of participation as a simple social good and of social networks as primarily pertaining to the internet arena. They unravel the play of power in political, artistic, sporting and musical cultures, establishing connections and disconnections between the countries that form our case studies.



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