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

By Victoria A. Newsom[1] and Lara Lengel[2]

Abstract

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

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

Introduction

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

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

---

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

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

31