

Genie out of the Bottle: Social Media and the Expansion of the Public Sphere in the Arab Gulf

Leila DeVriese

LDEVRIESE01@HAMLINE.EDU

HAMLINE UNIVERSITY

The economic liberalization launched by Gulf governments in order to integrate their markets into the global economy, has created a paradox for their monarchies. Investment in sophisticated telecommunications grids and expansion of the national labor force through intensive education and training programs for women – as a matter of economic survival – has let the proverbial genie out of the bottle. The top-down integration of women into the public sphere has inadvertently contributed to their politicization. This paper focuses on women's appropriation of the building blocks of globalization – Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and social media – to not only make their voices heard, but also contribute to an active critique of the socio-political realities of their societies. Subsequently, they now play a role in reshaping public discourse on controversial issues. Engaging new voices which previously had no outlet, most notably women, has expanded the sphere of public discourse in the Gulf. ICTs in general, and social media in particular (in the form of blogs, YouTube, Flickr, Twitter and Facebook), facilitate the creation of online communities engaged in carving out new public spaces to increase participation in discursive interactions in an expanded public sphere.

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Keywords:

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INTRODUCTION

Since the discovery of oil, the social contract – and by extension citizenship – in the historically rentier states of the Arabian Gulf has been characterized by political passivity in exchange for a share of the distributed rent. Recently, however, the economic liberalization and decentralization programs launched by the Gulf aimed at diversifying their economies, integrating their markets into the global economy and maintaining their positions as financial centers, has created a paradox for their monarchies. By investing in skilled human capital and sophisticated telecommunications grids, the Gulf countries have inadvertently opened the path for cyberactivism and other types of online communities, thereby reviving contentious politics and discourses of opposition that chip away at the supremacy of the nation state. Contentious politics comprises the widely varying forms of contention used by non-state actors to bring about social change. They range from social movements, civil wars to more modern repertoires such as cyberactivism (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001). While a well-educated, elite, skilled workforce in the fields of business and information technology (coupled with high speed Internet connectivity) were seen as winning formulas for attracting foreign businesses, this combination has also had an adverse and unanticipated effect. An increasingly educated and technologically savvy labor force has served as a breeding ground for online interaction, and the availability of high-speed digital media across most parts of the Gulf has expanded access to social networking. As governments cease to be the largest employers, and jobs are drying up due to the global economic recession and real estate collapse in the region, frustration is mounting among the newly educated and increasingly unemployed or underutilized youth. The compounded effect? The creation of online communities engaged in carving out new public spaces to increase participation in discursive interactions in a remolded public sphere.

In unison, the two above-mentioned phenomena have let the proverbial genie out of the bottle based on decisions made for the purposes of economic survival. Inadvertently, this top-down empowerment of women through state-instituted initiatives and policies, and their integration into the public sphere, has contributed to their politicization and mobilization. Not only are more women seeking public offices and decision-making roles, but they are making their voices heard using the building blocks of globalization – Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) – to affect public discourse on controversial issues. As such, this article seeks to examine the ways in which the forces, flows and institutions driving globalization helped politicize women in the Gulf. I intend to explore the various institutions of globalization that have been used by women in the Gulf to foster empowerment and greater engagement and visibility in the public sphere. My main aim is to map women's

appropriation and manipulation of some of the infrastructures of globalization to their own advantage, using these tools to advance their own agendas, build cross-cutting alliances, creating a sense of agency for women and redefining community for previously insulated groups. Ironically this modern technology has succeeded in reviving and expanding the practice of discursive dialogue that had once characterized traditional tribal politics in the Arabian Peninsula.

Premised on triangulation methodology, this study is based on a cartographic exercise by mapping the network of discourses, which are shaping and are shaped by the politics and practices of cyber activists. This approach consists of content analysis, archival research and exploration of existing secondary material, including print and online media, and primary material from websites, Facebook pages, Twitter feeds and blogs. Online content by organizations and activists mirror the conceptualization of issues and organizational philosophy: they give information about the groups' history, values and objectives, and strategies for mobilization. Discourse analysis of trending tweets, popular blogs and Facebook pages sheds lights on the significance of social media activists in mobilizing and reshaping discourses on controversial topics, and the extent to which social media has facilitated expansion of the public sphere. In addition to mapping the network of discourses in Gulf cyberspace, I also draw from a series of semi-structured interviews with activists, journalists, and academics using the grounded theory method advocated by Glaser and Strauss (1967).

GLOBALIZING ECONOMIES AND SOCIETIES IN TRANSITION

The political fervor rocking the Arab world today carries the imprint of the digital age and cyber-mobilization. Set against the backdrop of globalization, this novel phenomenon offers many opportunities and raises just as many questions. There are numerous definitions of globalization. Overall, globalization is characterized by (1) rapid integration of the world economy, (2) innovations and growth in international electronic communications and (3) increasing political and cultural awareness of the global interdependency of humanity (Appadurai 1996; Falk 1992; Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, and Perraton 1999; Sassen 1996). Globalization brings new opportunities, the most important of which is the possibility of a non-authoritarian universalism premised on global concepts as human rights, democracy and participation (Boli and Thomas 1997). The following section provides a brief background on the role of globalization in shifting the political and economic dynamics of the societies of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

Since the discovery of oil, and the economic boom experienced by the six Gulf countries in the 1970s and 1980s, 'rentierism' has been the term most close-

ly associated with the political systems of the GCC. Rentier states derive a substantial share (often 40 percent or more) of net income from external sources, such as export products like oil, as well as tourism and foreign aid. The rentier state, as the name suggests, relies mostly on rent from external sources of income rather than building local economies. Oil producing countries of the Gulf are often associated with this type of system since oil profits from the global market comprise their major source of revenue (Beblawi and Luciani 1987; Tétrault, Okruhlik and Kapiszewski 2011)

Rentier states recycle wealth by receiving economic rent, such as oil revenue, and distributing it through public spending programs, which have become a lynchpin of political legitimacy. In the ideal-type rentier system, the state enjoys substantial autonomy from society by virtue of external revenue: it delivers 'goods' to the population, in exchange for acquiescence. In the 1970s and 1980s, with relatively small populations, and skyrocketing GDPs, Gulf states were able to institute social welfare programs at little to no charge, earning them the description "allocation states."¹ With falling oil prices, shrinking oil reserves, and a series of global economic recessions, public spending and job creation has been shrinking from one generation to another (Kinninmont 2015). However, as state resources declined relative to demands, the presumed 'no taxation, no representation' implication of the rentier dynamic was beginning to falter.

By the 1990s, the Gulf states began to see globalization as an important mechanism for diversification and development of their economies through the investment of oil revenues. Therefore, the GCC countries have all actively pursued economic policies designed to not only maintain their competitiveness in the global economy, but also become key hubs in global financial flows, transportation and manufacturing. The architects of economic policy in the Gulf states were quick to recognize that the keys to becoming successful and powerful players in the global economy was investment and commitment to first-rate (mostly Westernized and English-language based) education, development of sustainable knowledge-based economies, and mobilization of national manpower (Kinninmont 2015).

It is noteworthy that despite the rapid pace of economic and social development, political reform has been insulated from real change until recently. As Gulf states open their societies to processes of economic and political globalization, there has been an incursion on the traditional political system. Traditional political systems are still very much hierarchical, patriarchal and tribal in nature, with power firmly consolidated and centralized within the extensive tribal networks

1 "Allocation states" rely mostly on spending policy, as opposed to "production states," which manufacture finished goods.

of each country. Mounting pressures brought on by the liberalizing forces of globalization are challenging the time-honored social contract characterized by an exchange of wealth for power while grassroots demands for political reform have gained momentum in the wake of the Arab Uprisings (Kinninmont 2015). Even in Gulf societies, where popular consensus has privileged a gradual and tempered approach to social and political reform, we are now seeing an involuntary acceleration in the pace of change in response to growing public demands. One example of these piecemeal changes includes reforms to election laws such as those recently instituted by Saudi Arabia, granting women the right to vote and run for municipal elections.

Historically, the centralization of power by the ruling families of the Gulf states constituted 'dynastic rule' in which key positions in the state apparatus are held by members of the extended tribe, which remains, for the most part, a cohesive ruling group through the sharing of benefits among the members. Thus, traditionally, political power and decision-making become a monopoly of the ruling elite, in most cases the ruling tribe or clan. And while citizens could express their grievances at a sheikh's *majlis* or *diuwaniya*, decision-making remained the prerogative of the ruler (Tétrault, 2000). Some scholars of Third Wave democratization such as Andrew Przeworski (1991) and David Pool (1993) argue that economic liberalization leads to a growing middle class, and it is this newly emerging bourgeoisie that ultimately serves as pressure group for political liberalization. Hinnebusch (2003, 2006), on the other hand, cautions against this optimistic assumption, arguing that in many cases in the Arab world the bourgeoisie was both created by, and in alliance with, the state. Thus the middle class were only interested in political liberalization which consolidated their own economic advantages and position in this highly hierarchical system. If anything, democratization which opened up political participation to the masses would pose a threat to the economic monopoly held by both the state and bourgeoisie. Distribution of oil wealth associated with rentierism and economic liberalization has contributed to the emergence of a middle class, which, until recently, was content with its growing prosperity and rise in living standards despite its political disenfranchisement. While historically this has been the case in the Gulf, the recent seismic shocks to the global economy and subsequent shrinking of state resources has damaged the ability of the Gulf States to shield their bourgeoisie from economic crises – unhinging the alliance between the two. The effects of the global financial crisis on the Gulf in 2008 and 2009, characterized by a simultaneous 60 percent drop in oil prices and real estate market crash, impacted, not only the Gulf States, but also this middle class composed of civil servants, small business owners and skilled workers.

As the Gulf region becomes more deeply entrenched in the global economic system, forces of

modernization and globalization are placing increasing pressures on these states to evolve politically and socially in response. In the past, the rentier wealth shared by a newly modernizing and prosperous citizenry had trumped any potential for political reform. However, the new generations born into growing wealth and increasingly modern infrastructure are no longer content with the old social contract. In an attempt to meet the domestic needs and international standards of increasingly globalized economies, most Gulf states have heavily invested in improving their educational systems and creating a more open media environment. This has contributed to the expansion of political consciousness and, consequently, heightened demands for greater participation in the political process and general enfranchisement. With the improvement in standards of education, exposure to global flows of information through ICTs and an increasingly independent media, we are seeing a younger generation that is more politically conscious, and interested in playing a more active role in the polity (See Figure One).

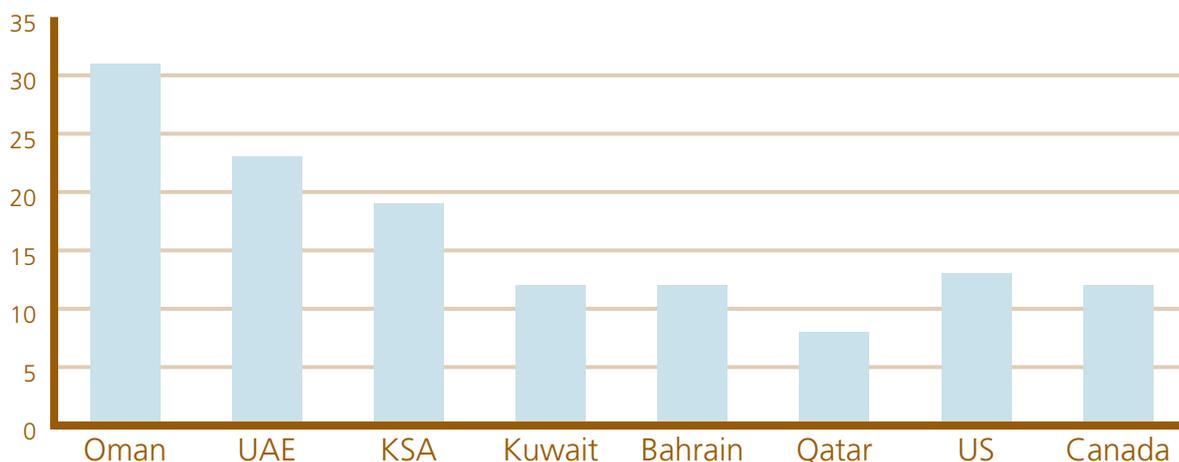
At the same time, as Gulf countries used their new oil wealth to finance rapid industrialization and catapult their societies into the global economy, they were faced with the dilemma of producing a skilled work force capable of sustaining and keeping up with this new pace of development. Given the acute imbalance in the ratio of national to expatriate populations in the Gulf, the various states quickly realized the importance of supporting women's education and their entry into the workforce for the purpose of economic survival (Kinninmont 2015). Therefore, it is no surprise that government expenditure on women's education in the Gulf is higher than the rest of the Middle East. Meanwhile, the low rate of employment among nationals (between 10–15 percent of the labor force in the UAE, for example) (Central Intelligence Agency 2011) is a long-standing social problem that has prompted the governments of the Gulf to enforce a quota system in both public and private employment

sectors to “nationalize” the labor force. When the policies of Saudization, Qatarization and Emiratization were first introduced, the expectation was that a rigid quota system enforcing periodic replacement of foreign labor by newly minted university graduates from the national population would eventually resolve the huge imbalance in the labor force. Since its implementation in the UAE almost 15 years ago, Emiratization has not succeeded in depressing growth of foreign labor. This has spurred states to create more training programs to help women transition successfully into the labor force and public life. The logic is that excluding women from public participation reduces by 50 percent the already small numbers of nationals running the country (Kinninmont 2015).

Even though economic empowerment of women and their participation in the economy is part and parcel of the social resource mobilization required for sustainable economic development, and despite the fact that women outnumber men in higher education enrollment (by as much as three to one in certain Gulf countries such as the UAE), their high level of training has not translated into widespread participation in the national workforce. According to UNDP statistics (2005), national women continue to make up the largest percentage of unemployed citizens, reaching as high as 70 percent in some cases (see also UNDP 2010). Despite the slow pace of integration into the workforce, the percentage of women working in the private sector has multiplied by as much as threefold since the previous generation (UNDP 2010).

At the same time, access to Westernized higher education systems and advanced information technology has played a significant role in the political socialization of the region's youth, and generated new expectations in terms of citizenship and political participation for both genders. Satellite TV channels, such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiyya, offering programming formatted around audience participation have heightened not only interest in current events, but also participation in discursive practices (Murphy 2009).

Figure One: Public expenditure on education as percentage of total government expenditures. (2008 World Bank Figures)



The recent Arab uprisings have further energized this new generation of highly literate, and wired youth, and we are now seeing a new generation of politicized women (and men) seeking to make their mark of the futures of their respective countries, a subject which is beyond the scope of this article however.

As the region reels from the economic shocks of the global recession, Gulf societies are increasingly questioning the viability of a development strategy premised solely on economic growth. The central debate that is emerging in different contexts across the region stems from a reevaluation of the relationship between the citizens and the state and the need for a new social contract that is not founded on legitimization bought through government handouts. Consensus is building around the need for a system that allows citizens to actively participate in transparent and fair decision-making processes and shape the future trajectory of their societies (DeVriese 2013).

PILLARS OF GLOBALIZATION: INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

Since 2005, Arab governments have been investing (to varying degrees) in telecommunications infrastructure for greater Internet connectivity through broadband, mobile Internet, and fiber optic cables for increased speeds and capacities to meet the needs of increasingly digital economies and youthful populations (Murphy 2009). In the Middle East, according to Internet World Stats, in 2011, there are an estimated 72,497,466 Internet users, amounting to 33.5 percent penetration. The six Gulf countries enjoy the highest rates of Internet penetration in the Arab World, with the UAE leading at 69 percent (Facebook 53.8 percent), followed by Qatar at 66.5 percent (Facebook 38.1 percent), Bahrain 53.5 percent (Facebook 26 percent), Kuwait 42.4 percent (Facebook 33.9 percent), Saudi Arabia 43.6 percent (Facebook 17.4 percent), and Oman 48.4 percent (Facebook 12 percent). Despite these high penetration rates, it is important to recognize that a digital divide still persists between the wealthy and poor of these societies.

Rapidly liberalizing markets for mobile telephone services and the ever-increasing number of local and regional service providers make GSM (Global System for Mobile) technology the ICT success-story of the Arab world. Between 1999 and 2006 the number of mobile operators based in the Arab countries had tripled (Middle East Economic Digest 2006, 29). By 2006, the eight largest regional telecom companies accounted for 18 percent of the total capitalization of the top 100 Arab companies, expanding from around 73 billion USD to approximately 174 billion USD (ZAYWA 2008a, b). Among the top 100 Arab companies were regional giants like Saudi Telecom, Kuwait's Mobile Telecommunications Company (MTC, which owns Zain), the Bahrain Telecommunications Com-

pany (Batelco) and the Dubai-based Etisalat (Murphy, 2009).

Mobile usage penetration rates are particularly high in the Gulf with percentages of GSM subscribers highest at 102.99 percent in Bahrain, 100.86 percent in the UAE and 92.15 percent in Qatar. (ZAYWA 2008a, b). Growing demand in the Arab mobile telephone market has led to the development of regional telecommunication companies like Etisalat, Batelco, and Zain, which are not only extending their service provision into other Arab countries, but also reaching into Africa and South Asia.

New satellite TV programming, GSM technologies and digital and web-based social media have all contributed to a cultural revolution premised on new participatory behavior and discursive practices. According to Murphy (2009, 1149),

Everything from calling in to Arab talk shows; blogging to protest a common Arab subordination to censorial regimes; using mobile telephones to meet and form relationships with the opposite sex; meeting in Internet café's to formulate strategies to beat the latest regime efforts to block sites of interest; voting in television talent shows; and even making controversial news or interviews a subject for debate: these are all newly available activities which generate cultural transformations which challenge the subordinating impacts of informational capitalism as much as they entail engaging with them.

Critics of social media often cite low Internet penetration rates and the digital divide as a barrier to harnessing the true potential of social media for social activism. Over the past decade cyber cafes have indeed become increasingly prevalent, and affordable in the Arab World; however, it is the availability of smart phones across many parts of the Arab world that has made all the difference. Smart phones with Internet connections mean that one is able to download and upload social media any time anywhere.

Furthermore, the demographic shifts that have taken place across the Arab World over the past few decades have created a ticking time bomb, in part due to the inevitable population explosion – no pun intended – that accompanies post-independence development. The majority of Arab populations are under 30 and educated yet face: double digit unemployment, rising national debt and food costs, and political marginalization. It is no surprise that many are angry. Many of this tech-savvy demographic are also avid users of social networking, often using their smart phones or internet connected mobiles.

Facebook users in the region doubled from 11.9 million to 21.3 million in 2010, according to the Dubai School of Government Arab Social Media Report (2011). Growing Internet penetration, and accessibility to social media via smart phones has low-

ered the barriers to participation in discursive arenas expanding the interpreters and carriers of information in the Arab world. One of the key developments coming out of the Arab uprisings is an Arab public engaging in critical dialogue with the state (Herrera 2014; Herrera and Sakr 2014).

DEMOCRATIZATION OF PUBLIC SPHERE?

The premise for this analysis draws heavily on Jürgen Habermas's theory of Public Sphere (1989), which highlights the instrumentality of the public sphere as an effective channel for the expression of civil society's needs and/or grievances, and ultimately instigating social change. In order to understand the transformative potential of social media, it is important to first understand its influence on shifting dynamics of public sphere and, inversely, exploring the significance of the public sphere as a foundation of deliberative democracy. The concept of the public sphere has become the most widely cited paradigm for understanding the role of social media in redefining civic engagement and reshaping political spaces.

According to Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, the modern bourgeois public sphere emerged when private members of society converged to exercise their reason in a public forum (1989, 1996). In Habermas's model, the medium of talk and the emergent public sphere where citizens debate and air their grievances become an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction, and, thus, a main locus for political participation. As a result, in Habermas's model of civil society, the discourse that takes place within the public sphere is seen as influencing 'democratic opinion' and 'will formation' by generating the issues that ascend to the public agenda and subsequently enter parliamentary debates – ultimately transforming and legitimating legislative reform. An expansion of the public sphere offers new opportunities for liberal political engagement by including a range of members of society from across the board, which is ultimately the key to enhance democratic and emancipatory potential (Calhoun 1992, 2).

In *Between Facts and Norms* (1996), Habermas introduces the idea of an informal public sphere, as opposed to the 18th century formal bourgeoisie public sphere. An informal public sphere is one that "has the advantage of a medium of unrestricted communication" and is therefore effective in widening public discourse, and allowing the articulation of collective identities and need interpretations (Habermas 1996, 308). The Internet is the prime medium to facilitate this process for new online communities and cyber-activists in particular.

Many theorists have criticized Habermas' focus on a singular formal public sphere. The counterargument presented by Craig Calhoun emphasizes the plurality of the public sphere, composed of multiple different "overlapping publics" (1994, 162). It is within these

alternative publics that marginalized groups – in this instance the subaltern masses of Arab countries – formulate what Calhoun describes as "oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs." Meanwhile, Fraser (1992) proposed the existence of 'subaltern counterpublics,' which she describes as spheres in which the subaltern can formulate counter-discourses; opening the space for oppositional frames and interpretations of the [Gramscian] multitudes' interests, needs, and identities. These counterpublics serve as an alternative to dominant publics, providing the subaltern with a space to engage and interact with and yet remain separate from the hegemonic or formal public sphere.² For the multitudes which are disenfranchised and locked out of the formal or mainstream publics, this then becomes the space where they voice their grievances, develop counter-discourses, and challenge meta narratives.³ The participation of increasing numbers of women and subaltern groups in this space also serves to challenge the 'public' or 'private' dichotomy. Historically this dichotomy has relegated what are deemed as 'private' issues to the private sphere of the home and family, and therefore kept them out of the public agenda that ultimately shapes policy and governance.

Although Fraser's contribution to the notion of counterpublics is invaluable, I would argue that due to the fluidity, interaction and overlap between virtual and real formal publics, counterpublics are no longer separate. Namely, they exist on a horizontal plane with multiple other publics, none more privileged than the other. The Internet and social media have not only undermined the previous hierarchy of publics, but they have deterritorialized them by connecting audiences across borders. By extension, social media allows citizens to politically participate out of the formal public sphere, as members of an expanded polity.

One of the features of this democratized public sphere is the changing nature of discourse and communication reflected by the inclusion of ordinary citizens using vernacular and slang, and multiple mediums (poetry, rap, YouTube videos) as vehicles for their messages. In Anderson's (2000, 39) view both the public and the discourse, or content, are democratized. Gradually, as they hone their civic engagement and discursive skills, citizens are able to expand their political participation beyond the national public and

2 Gaytari Spivak's (1988) seminal work, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* uses the term the 'subaltern' to refer to the most marginalized and disenfranchised members of society.

3 This newly emerging alternative to the official public sphere that is restricted and manipulated by the state is what Nancy Fraser (1992) calls *subaltern counter publics* where subordinated social groups that have been historically denied entry into the formal public are now able to carve a space to express their own views and interests.

connect with others across boundaries. This allows them to participate in transnational dialogues on issues of local relevance, such as human rights. As they gain knowledge of different narratives, discursive paradigms and platforms, citizens become better equipped to articulate their grievances, interests and demands, often by tapping into global rhetoric of human rights and democratization. The next logical step from there would be mobilization and action beyond the ether or cyberspace, taking their demands on to the street (McCombs and Shaw 1972, 1997; McCombs 1982; Rogers, Hart and Dearing 1997).⁴

WOMEN IN CYBER-SPACE

One of the recurring criticisms of Habermas' public sphere is its reinforcement of the public/private dichotomy. Social media deconstructs this binary as it blurs the boundaries of public/private with respect to both participation and content. In the Gulf in particular, where gender segregation is upheld in many areas of life, the new virtual publics have become a necessary tool for youth to create "new forms of communication across gender lines, interrupting traditional social rituals, and giving young people new autonomy in how they run their lives" (Wheeler 2003, 57).

Since the inception of modern notions of citizenship during the French and American revolutions of the 18th century, the political construction of an ontologically masculine citizenship has been closely associated with the public-private divide/dichotomy (Lister 1997). All matters considered the domain of a

male (namely rational, logical, independent) were of public interest belonging in the public sphere, while those matters considered female (emotional, corporal, dependent, concerned with familial affairs) were relegated to the private. The public/private has contributed to the exclusion of women and other marginalized groups from full membership and participation in the public space. Women in particular are affected by the exclusionary nature of citizenship, which Lister argues creates non or partial citizens unable to reap the full benefits of membership in a polity or citizenry. The emergence of new publics in the Gulf challenges this exclusivity by deconstructing the public/private dichotomy and redefining what it means to do politics. Now, the personal has become political in Gulf societies – thus expanding the parameters of the public sphere.

Blogs can serve as catalysts for previously unlikely mobilization facilitated by political opportunities – often in the form of elections, national scandals, or controversial legislation. But can they provide the basis for a new public sphere in the Arab Gulf? Two recent examples of how the growing female blogosphere in the Gulf is tackling personal and often taboo issues through the use of personal blogging are "Glitter" from Kuwait, and "Silly Bahraini Girl" from Bahrain. Glitter (GG) is a blog posted by a Kuwaiti woman who focuses on personal and romantic relationships, and social norms in Kuwaiti society. Silly Bahraini Girl (SBG) is a blog posted by a Bahraini woman addressing a wide range of social issues such as censorship, free-speech and cyberactivism.⁵ In Saudi Arabia, a country where women are barred from driving, and need permission from a male guardian to travel abroad, many women are embracing the freedom of anonymity on the Internet. Saudi Eve, in her late 20s and single when she first came onto the blogging scene in 2005, gained notoriety as one of the first female bloggers to regularly write about her love life, religion and daily issues shaping the lives of young women in Saudi Arabia.⁶ Although her last blog entry is in April 2009, her blog is somewhat representative of the type of blogs written by young women in the Gulf. According to a 2011 Khaleej Times editorial, an estimated half of Saudi blogs are written by women, and most address issues that directly impact women's lives in the Kingdom (Janardhan 2011). Saudi women bloggers range in age from 18-30 years, are university-educated, and use pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. They write in both Arabic and English, mixing journal-type entries, social commentaries, short stories, essays and poetry, and some even host digital photo and art collections. Thus they distinguish themselves from both professional journalists and columnists blogging for established media sites,

⁴ To gauge the influence of social media on democratization of the public sphere and reshaping of public agendas, I use the theory of agenda-setting, whereby issues move up and down the ladder of the public agenda as various stakeholders and constituencies mobilize and lobby to push their issues forward. Usually, research in this area focuses on platforms and agendas of formal organizations and their translation into policy. I will, however, focus on the use of cross-cutting strategies (social media, networking and protests) by non-ideological grassroots popular movements to generate public discourse on social justice (specifically political and economic rights enshrined in the language of human rights) and the push to move these issues to the forefront of public consciousness. The agenda-setting process is a competitive process by which issue advocates use various mechanisms and channels, including the media and varying public forums, to gain the attention of policy elites. Agenda-setting is often depicted as a zero-sum game due to the scarcity of space in the public agenda, meaning that in order for an issue to ascend to the higher rungs of the public agenda, it must first push other issues down. For the purposes of this article, the agenda-setting theory is most useful in understanding the political processes by which public discourse is able to elevate social problems to the public agenda and consequently capable of generating public policy reform.

⁵ The blog is written by journalist Amira Al Hosseini, who goes by @Just Amira on Twitter.

⁶ <http://eveksa.blogspot.com>.

as well as Internet bulletin boards that often have a militant Islamic angle. “Our society is very critical and I don’t feel I can say what I want to say without censoring my words if I use my real name,” said Saudi blogger Uber Girl in 2007 (<http://ubergirl87.blogspot.com>).

For Saudi women, and much of the Gulf, blogs have become a safe haven, where they can demand social and cultural change and express frustration with the slow pace of reform in their country. While the majority of Saudi female bloggers prefer to post journal-type entries, there are also some writers who have a more activist agenda. In 2006, Saudi-yat.blogspot – a blog run by two female bloggers, Khoulah and Farah – was seen as groundbreaking in its agenda. Khoulah and Farah (who previously produced individual blogs) believed they could bring about change by educating Saudi women and the wider public about their Islamic rights. Their blog, which also sought to celebrate and encourage successful Saudi women, has served as a precedent for other activist-oriented blogs by women. During the early stages of the Saudi Blogosphere, another popular blog (Masoolah) was trying to form a support group for Saudi female bloggers, called the Saudi Female Blog Group. While many of these blogs are now discontinued, others have sprouted in their place. Some of the more issue focused ones are “Saudiwoman” which addresses “women’s rights to dignity,” and “saudiwomendriving”; both these blogs focus mainly on the ban on driving.⁷ Others like Samarworld provide more general social commentary, criticizing everything from tribalism to racism in the kingdom.⁸

In 2006, a number of Kuwaiti blogs launched a virtual campaign for election reform and used their online networks to rally support for street demonstrations in a Ukraine-type “orange” revolution. The campaign was organized by three university student bloggers who seized upon a call by pro-reform MPs to cut the country’s electoral districts from 25 to five as a method to fight corruption. They turned this demand into a catchy “5 for Kuwait” orange logo. The blogging community mobilized hundreds of young people to take to the streets waving the “5 for Kuwait” orange banners in a series of protests. Emboldened by popular support, the parliament engaged in a standoff with the government, ultimately forcing the country’s Emir, Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmed Al Sabah, to dissolve parliament, and hold new elections a month later. At the center of the telecommunication boom in the Gulf is the region’s expanding youth population. In gender segregated societies where mingling between the sexes is severely restricted, text messaging offers opportunities for flirtation, organizing social events and even dating. Text messaging, therefore, becomes a

pressure valve for maintaining social decorum. For example, during their 2005 campaign for voting rights, Kuwaiti women attributed their mobilization success to text messaging, which had allowed them to call younger protesters out of schools and into the streets.

In the 1990s messages of dissent and Islamist activism were spread through facsimile machines. In the new millennium, independent satellite television channels were set to transform Arab populations’ exposure and understanding of the world around them. With the revolutionary advances in ICTs, the Internet has become a dominant channel for messaging, mobilizing and cyberactivism. Each new technology has been met with a parallel response from the region’s authoritarian governments to control the flow of information, from restricting licenses for facsimile machines to blocking dissident Websites. (Herrera 2014; Herrera and Sakr 2014). The Gulf states have yet to figure out how to control text messaging channels without negatively impacting the profit-margins of regional telecom giants, whose stock prices have soared as mobile messaging has exploded.

CYBER ACTIVISM, WOMEN, AND THE ARAB UPRISINGS, OH MY!

In Bahrain, two vocal activists on the Twitter stage are the Khawaja sisters, Maryam and Zaynab, daughters of detained human rights activist, Abdulhadi Al Khawaja. Maryam Al Khawaja is a self-professed Twitter activist who also serves as the head of the foreign relations office at the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR), and has been actively using social media, specifically tweeting blow-by-blow documentation of protests and human rights abuses since 2011. Zaynab, an active member of the Bahraini pro-democracy youth movement, has been an outspoken voice on human rights abuses and government crackdowns during the recent protests in Bahrain. Zaynab, who in 2011 had 31, 000 followers on Twitter, has had her tweets retweeted worldwide -- thus transmitting her message to global audiences.

In personal communication with Maryam Al Khawaja in February 2012 she described cyberactivism, particularly on Twitter, as essential because the unrest in Bahrain “has been ignored by mainstream media.” She went on to say that social media has been instrumental in disseminating information through 3-D and video images of what the government is doing” as well as “mobilizing, and advocating for the return to Pearl Square by announcing strategies and plans for the next protest on Twitter first.” Al Khawaja added that blogs, personal and private Facebook pages such as BCHR or Nabeel Rajab’s personal Facebook page, and Twitter posts have created an effective “platform for discussion, where people voice their grievances” (Al Khawaja 2012).

Quoting her colleague and fellow human rights activist Nabeel Rajab, Maryam Al Khawaja said that

⁷ See <http://saudiwoman.me/> and <http://www.saudiwomendriving.blogspot.com/>.

⁸ <http://samarworld.wordpress.com/>.

the current situation “has created a population that is half citizen journalists and half human rights activists.” She believes the first group has been empowered by social media and the latter has been influenced by high levels of engagement by human rights activists, and the subsequent diffusion of human rights frames into daily rhetoric.

Frustrated with what many call a media blackout on the protests and uprising in Bahrain, activists within the movement have been very adept at getting their message out to the rest of the world. For example, when Zaynab Al Khawaja was arrested in December, videos of the protest that took place last winter at the Centre City shopping mall, one of the country’s main retail outlets, went viral through an aggressive social media campaign whereby posts were channeled through multiple platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, SMS, and other messaging applications. In some cases, activists have resorted to the *speak2tweet* application, which allows users to tweet messages by calling an international number, and is but one example of the platforms used by activists to circumvent Internet blackouts.

As post-Arab uprisings parliamentary elections in Tunisia and Egypt ushered in Islamist parties through landslide victories for the Tunisian Ennahda in Tunisia and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party and the Salafi Al Nour Party, the question that emerges is what will happen to women’s rights in these countries? Will the rise of conservative Islamist parties signal a reversal or rescission of women’s hard won rights driving them out of the public arena and back into the home? At time of writing, the answer is still not evident; it is a chapter of history that is still being written for both countries, and beyond the scope of this article. However, what is well within the scope of this study is the current state of public sphere discourse on women’s rights and women’s role in Bahraini society, specifically in the wake of the protests that swept through the small island nation.

During The Frontline Club’s program on *Women of the Revolution* hosted by BBC Arabic, Maryam Al Khawaja described the significance of women’s participation in the protests in Bahrain as “setting a very important step. With this revolution, women have found a new voice for themselves.” The debate, which took place in London, brought together three female panelists; from Bahrain, Libya, and Iran, respectively, to describe their experiences with uprisings. In discussing her projections for women in the aftermath of the Arab protests, Al Khawaja said:

Pearl Square is the Tahrir Square of Bahrain. There, women read poetry, gave political speeches, and set up their own tents to talk about women rights and movements. One of the important things about the revolution in Bahrain was breaking the stereotype that exists in the western world.

Among the first wave of protesters to descend on Pearl square were women – children in tow – demanding reform and enfranchisement of citizenry in general, not only women. “Women have played a hugely influential role this time and put themselves in danger,” said Nabeel Rajab, President of the BCHR; “they treated the injured in the streets and nursed them in their homes when they were too afraid to go to hospital” (Rice et al. 2011).

Not only have women – especially medical staffers – been detained or disappeared, but many have become politicized and have taken to the streets to protest the disappearance and abuse of their male kin. This phenomenon is very common, and has similarities to the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, a loose association of Argentine mothers whose children disappeared during the military dictatorship between 1976 and 1983. Initially demonstrating for the release of their family members, the women became politicized through this process, and the group later morphed into a vocal advocacy organization for human rights.

The Arab uprisings, that brought both men and women activists to the street, signaled a convergence and merging of the virtual public sphere and physical public space. Whether it was Tahrir or Pearl Roundabout, women were bravely shifting their activism and platforms beyond the virtual public sphere.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Stories of Democracy, is an in-depth study of civil society and politics in Kuwait, where that late political scientist Mary Ann Tétreault (2000) demonstrates that a monarchical system richer in resources, and well integrated into the international political economy through its oil exports, can also hold a significant space for civil society to develop. Tétreault (Ibid, 7) stresses the importance of ‘agency’: ‘the capacity of human beings to act, speak, convince and mobilize one another to do something together,’ as contributing to the evolution of ‘political space.’⁹ In her discussion of the significance of protected spaces in facilitating democratic politics, Tétreault highlights the roles played by using the home, mosque and *diwaniyya* in mobilizing political resources.¹⁰ In the wake of the Arab Uprisings and global Occupy movements, virtual publics, and by extension counterpublics, can provide just the type of ‘political space’ Tétreault described.

9 In describing political space, Tétreault references Hannah Arendt’s concept of ‘space of appearance’: ‘geographic and metaphoric locations within which it is possible for people to invent new identities, relationships and institutions.’

10 The peculiarly Kuwaiti institution of the *diwaniyya* refers to a regular gathering of men at the homes of prominent individuals to meet socially and discuss public issues, and became a locus of activity in the democracy movement in 1989 and 1990.

The development of civil society within the Gulf has lagged far behind most sectors. Individual bids to establish voluntary organizations are constrained through arbitrary and opaque decision-making processes governed by institutions, such as the ministry of social affairs and/or interior. The potential for a legitimate civil society capable of acting as a force for social mobilization is further constrained through legislation barring the establishment of political parties and strong regulation of civil society organizations which strips them of any independent functionality. With heavy restrictions placed on freedom of association, expression and protest, avenues for participation in the public sphere and political life of the nation become severely limited.

In the absence of an independent and free civil society, the expansion of public space and democratization of the public sphere through ICTs is laying the foundations for an independent and inclusive polity. The creation of a open and pluralistic public space that encourages an independent-minded and active civil society fully engaged in the political process is conducive to elements of democratization: those that guarantee the free expression of ideas, engaged communities, structured political dialogue and professional and responsible media. The pro-reform movements' use of ICTs is a manifestation of a newly emboldened citizenry's attempt to create, in the long term, a public space that fosters freedom of expression and participation by varying segments of society.

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