

Chapter 67

Assemblages of Dissent: The Emergence of Online Identities during the Egyptian Revolution

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the online identities of protestors and their transnational audiences that emerged across social media platforms during the Egyptian Revolution of 2011. Using the framework of assemblage theory, the authors argue that these online identities emerged as a result of the assemblages of dissent that formed between protestors and their audiences. In particular, they argue that, as protestors and their transnational audiences came together in assemblages of dissent, both gained emergent online identities as activists in the transnational mediatized event of the revolution. Protestors initiated these relationships through petitions for audiences to join the Facebook page “We are All Khaled Said” and follow the Twitter hashtag #Jan25; their catalogue of grievances against Mubarak’s regime; and, finally, their digital assertions of lived experiences of violence. As transnational audiences took up these texts as invitations to participate in the doing of this mediatized event, they responded by “liking,” commenting, retweeting, and creating new texts of their own. As a result, both protestors and their audiences around the globe gained online identities as activists in the revolution.

INTRODUCTION

While the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 was reported across traditional news venues by global media outlets, protestors also reported on the Revolution using social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Many of these protestors transmitted social media texts from the streets of Egypt during moments they experienced police

brutality and within scenes of unified force among anti-Mubarak protestors. As these protestors used social media to provide real-time reports of events as they unfolded, they participated in the formation of online identities for both themselves and audience members around the globe who were tuning in through social media. This chapter seeks to understand these online identities and their formation as a result of the discursive strategies

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employed by activists to engage transnational audiences witnessing the Revolution through digital screens in coffee shops, bus stops, and office break rooms around the globe. Using the framework of assemblage theory, I argue that the online identities of protestors and their audiences emerged from the assemblages of dissent that formed between them as a result of their exchanges across social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

Events such as the Revolution of 2011 underscore John Tomlinson's observation in *Globalization and Culture* (1999) that most people will experience globalization through extended mediated experiences rather than actual physical mobility. Stig Hjarvard (2008) defines mediatization as "a double-sided process of high modernity in which the media on one hand emerge as an independent institution with a logic of its own" and are, on the other hand "an integrated part of other institutions like politics, work, family, and religion as more and more of these institutional activities are performed through both interactive and mass media" (p. 1). In the global mediatized event of the Revolution, the logic of social media facilitated the formation of an event that was characterized by the open and participatory logics of social media (Shirky). As a result of this logic, the Revolution was woven through the "institutions" of people's daily lives as a) updates about the Revolution were interspersed between and among other, more locally oriented updates about family, friends, work, and religion across social media platforms and b) social media enabled these streams of information to be interjected whenever and wherever people checked updates from personal cell phones, portable computers, and the like. As social media has been integrated throughout the "institutional activities" of people's daily lives, it has also contributed to what Sasha Costanza-Chock (2003) has suggested are the primary goals of "electronic civil disobedience:" "to bring together groups of people in collective action" and facilitate "changes in social norms, behaviors, and ways of thinking among a public

that extends beyond movement constituents or beneficiaries" (p. 178). Similarly, those participating in the mediatized global event of the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 extended beyond national borders to include transnational audiences located around the globe.

Transnationalism turns our attention to how the "electronic civil disobedience" of Egyptian protestors across social media extended beyond the local context of the Revolution and enabled this movement to reach a much broader audience around the world. Exploring the Revolution with an emphasis on these transnational audiences turns our attention to the discursive strategies used by protestors as a means of connecting their local experiences of the Revolution to transnational audiences around the globe. Steven Vertovec (1999) writes that transnationalism describes "a condition" wherein despite distance and intervening borders, "certain kinds of relationships have been globally intensified and now take place paradoxically in a planet-spanning yet common – however virtual – arena of activity" (p. 3). Transnationalism highlights the ways in which this "arena of activity" remains provocatively rooted in the local contexts of those who are participating in it. As Sidney Tarrow (2005) points out, "even as they make transnational claims, [transnational activists] draw on the resources, networks, and opportunities of the societies they live in" (p. 2). Highlighting the ways that transnational activists connect the local and the global, Michael Howard (2011) claims that transnationalism is "essentially about humans creating boundaries and then crossing them" (ch. 1). In the case of the Egyptian Revolution, transnationalism offers an opportunity to explore the unique role of social media in connecting the physical locations of protestors in Egypt to audiences scattered across the globe. Through social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, these distant audiences were able to connect and respond to the local experiences of protestors and, by doing so, participate as activists in the Revolution as it was mediatized across

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