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Democratic Activism and Partitioned Space in Online Muslim Communities

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Democratic Activism and Partitioned Space in Online Muslim Communities

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By

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Table of Contents:

Introduction:

Technological changes in communication have radically altered the way humans communicate with one another. For almost all of human history, the ability to harness and create communication technology was limited to a select few who possessed the means to produce it, whether the means were scriptoriums, printing presses, or movie sets. The 20th century brought drastic changes in mass media production. Newspapers, cinemas, and radio programs allowed communication to reach wide audiences for the first time. However, this new mass media production was capital intensive and required specific, technical knowledge that limited the ability of an average person to widely express his or her views. An individual could only disseminate this mass media within his or her limited geographic space, personal networks, or both. An individual could only pass media beyond his or her immediate social network in designated public spaces, such as town hall meetings, and town squares.

While separate from mass media like newspapers or radio shows, widespread access to telephone technology was the first change in how people could interact with one another. Telephone technology broke down geographic space, allowing people to communicate with their personal network immediately, regardless of physical distance. Letter writing and telegraph systems were slow and limited by specific governmental or corporate offices that controlled access as middlemen. However, telephone technology has limitations. An individual was still confined to communicating with his or her immediate social network and telecommunication companies, with limitations on infrastructure development, limited communication to specific groups of people.

While telephone technology broke down geographic space, audiocassettes were a further radical development in communication technology. The "little media"[1] removed control of production and dissemination from governments and large corporations. Individuals could produce and copy audiocassettes without a large, capital intensive operation. However, the ability to disseminate audiocassette tapes was limited by geography, due to their physical nature. Therefore, while an individual could, in theory, disseminate his or her own views, realistically, only major religious and political voices had the importance to achieve a widespread geographic distribution.

Fax technology represents an intermediate technology. It shares the benefits of both telephones and audiocassettes. Like telephones, fax machines broke down geographic boundaries; an individual could communicate across large distances with only a phone line. Furthermore, like audiocassettes, producing and copying communication was cheap and relatively accessible. However, one could only send messages to a defined list of fax numbers, limiting reach to specific, closed networks. Like telephones, fax communication is also limited by infrastructure development and technological availability.

So called "New Social Media" appears to overcome all of the limitations of earlier technologies. New Social Media (NSM)[2] is a set of diverse Internet communication technology that arose in the 21st century. It includes self-publishing

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[1]Hamid Naficy, "Cassettes." In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*., edited by John L. Esposito. Oxford Islamic Studies Online, http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236MIW/e0140 (accessed 01-Apr-2014).

[2] I use NSM to refer only to New Social Media. While NSM sometimes refers to New Social Movement theory, which I will discuss later, I will spell out New Social Movement, while abbreviating New Social Media.

formats like blogs, social network communities like Facebook, and widespread micro-blogging platforms like Twitter and Tumblr. While these platforms function differently in Cyberspace, they all overcome the limitations of previous media. The average individual now has the ability to disseminate his or her views worldwide, cheaply, and outside a personal network. This new communication technology is immensely powerful; however, it presents new limitations for mass communication.

Many commentators were quick to announce the 2011 revolutions throughout the Arab world as a social media revolution.[3] Analysts attributed mass protests to the unique characteristics of NSM. People were able to organize, disseminate news, and share worldwide information outside of state controlled media. This analysis ignored many fundamental social factors in many countries, for example in Egypt. Unemployment was high and youth unemployment was astronomical. The unique history of repression and political corruption was virtually forgotten. When commentators considered that only 5 million of Egypt's 80 million people actually used social media, the attention turned to new media as instrumental in accelerating the pace of traditional political movements. New Media provided alternative forms of communication that allowed people to organize outside traditional political systems, exploiting social ills to create an activism beyond its inherently limited reach.

Many scholars have argued that New Social Media, by breaking down geographic and networked boundaries, provides a new nexus for democratic activism. Manuel

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[3] Alexia Tsotsis, "Mubarak Shut Down the Internet, and The Internet Paid Him in Kind," TechCrunch, February 11, 2011.

Castells[4] and Sidney Tarrow[5] have argued that marginalized groups previously excluded from mainstream political activity, such as women, transgendered people, queer people, and secularists, now have a platform to express ideas and policy positions. These groups can safely dissent from prominent ideological positions, thus opening a new arena for public discourse. Castells argues that changes in communication technology break down personal social networks entirely. Tarrrow elaborates on this concept, postulating that this new technology allows individuals to organize outside traditional political groups like political parties, labor unions, and NGOs. Furthermore, by eradicating geographic boundaries, NSM allows for transnational activism. This new activism unites individuals previously unconnected by local political organizations; most importantly, this new transnational activism unites disparate people primarily by ideological affiliation. Environmental, anti-nuclear, and religious movements, e.g., transcend the localized nature of political structures to create global movements, united by a common ideological cause.

Scholars such as Dale Eickelman, Jon Anderson[6], and Gary Bunt[7], following Habermas', have postulated this new platform as a widening of the traditional "Public Sphere." While Habermas considered Mass Media as a unique subject in the Public Sphere, NSM allows individuals to communicate their own ideas in a mass context.

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[4] Manuel Castells, *The Rise of The Network Society* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 1996)
[5] Sidney G. Tarrow. *The New Transnational Activism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005)
[6] Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson, *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003)
[7] Gary R. Bunt, *Virtually Islamic: Computer-Mediated Communication and Cyber Islamic Environments* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000)

Changes in technology caused many scholars to view the Public Sphere as "widened," allowing new voices previously excluded to enter into public dialogue.

If we are to follow this scholarly consensus, NSM will bypass traditional political and media structures entirely, ushering in a new area of globalized democratic activism. NSM, by breaking down geographic and personal networks, undermines the prevailing order. Previously marginalized groups have the ability to bypass rigid political structures and social movements can organize across national boundaries. However, I will offer an important caveat to this literature. While changes in communication technology have broken down many geographic barriers, Internet platforms are neither as open nor as democratic as the literature suggests. Online platforms also give room to reactionary, anti-democratic forces that have been excluded from the political process. One only needs to glance at the comment sections of YouTube videos or major news publications to see the vitriolic misogynist, racist hate spewed on a regular basis. No major news outlet would publish an opinion piece containing the bile of these comment sections. Even the commentators would be unlikely to attach their names to such comments if their neighbors, family, and friends could see them. Only the relative anonymity afforded by the Internet allows these voices to enter public discourse. Furthermore, traditional institutions—political and religious—have made use of this new technology. From official government press releases online to the Pope's Twitter account, traditional structures also engage in cyberspace. Online platforms represent a new sphere of contested political space, not merely a new platform for "liberal" or "left-wing" groups.

My research demonstrates that, while NSM creates a new form of open public space, this space still reflects many of the same ideological and gendered boundaries of physical space. The fact that changes in technology give voices to marginalized groups does not mean these new participants can access all aspects of cyberspace equally. Many forums and blogs maintain strict ideological homogeneity, eliminating dissenting views from the discussion. Groups often use language coding, with particular words marking a space as belonging to a specific ideology; for example, the word "jihad" is traditionally used in Islamic jurisprudence to denote state-sanctioned warfare. However, on militant Islamist forums, it denotes a specific individual obligation to attack "imperialist powers," primarily Israel and the United States. However, both the word and the concept of jihad do not exist without context. Instead, jihad is tied to the concepts like "kaffir"; on jihadist sites, "kaffir" is divorced from Islamic jurisprudence on apostasy, meaning, instead, a particular kind of American or European political persuasion. It also includes those Muslims who are perceived to be sympathetic to any kind of cosmopolitan liberalism.

It is not the word itself that codes meaning, but the wider context that the word is deployed. According to the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz, ritual acts are symbolic acts, which serve to create and reify a wider cultural system.[8] In Islam Observed, Geertz analyzes religious development, with a particular focus on saint veneration and religious syncretism, to interpret a specific cultural milieu that impacts politics and all facets of daily life in Morocco and Indonesia. While Geertz never discounts speech as a ritual act, speech occurs within a wider cultural system. The basis

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[8] Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968)

of Geertz's "thick description" is placing symbolic acts within a wider cultural context. However, cyberspace is unique because speech is the only ritual act. Unlike physical space, there are no familial relationships, political orders, or religious practices in which to place online speech. Cyberspace, by its very nature, hides the person who is commentating, tweeting, or blogging. Language, as a symbolic act, is the only way to define a space as "belonging" to a specific group. This language coding, and the specific discursive genealogies that define it, serve as one of the primary ways online space can close itself to dissent.

Following Geertz, to understand a particular symbol within a cultural system, one needs to look at the wider context in which it is deployed. However, in cyberspace, a researcher can only look at language coding itself. Despite the limitations inherent in looking at language outside physical and cultural contexts, participants in online communities only experience linguistic symbols as well. Participants observe their fellow commentators and bloggers only through language. As such, language norms take on a specific symbolic characteristic that can create a cultural system in a relatively small space. While all communities develop specific slang or common expressions, these linguistic symbols take on a particular important in online communities.

In addition to ideological homogeneity, some online spaces enforce strict gender norms and define who "legitimate" voices in the discussion are. While the cloak of anonymity undoubtedly gives previously marginalized groups, such as women or queer individuals, the ability to participate in wider public conversations, these voices are often perceived not to exist. In closed online communities, commentators assume the

community to be homogenous. As such, whether or not a commentator on a blog or forum is a member of a marginalized group, the commentator is perceived to not be a member of this group. I will argue that when online space is partitioned along ideological or gendered lines, dissenting voices, regardless of whether they exist in physical space, are minimalized.

These problems are particularly pronounced in Salafi, a strict form of Islam that emphasizes literal emulation of the prophet Mohammad, online communities. Religious communities make truth claims that raise the stakes beyond political disagreements; instead, they tend to rest on meta- worldviews or ontological claims. This produces a specific kind of ideological community. Furthermore, Salafi communities are able to draw on a particular strain of Wahhabi *fiqh*, or Islamic jurisprudence, to justify a rigid separation of gender roles. While online space is open to anyone, specific practices can mark a space as closed to outsiders. I will use the online space inhabited by conservative Muslim religious communities to argue for a more refined conception of a widened Public Sphere.

Many Salafi forums, such as IslamicAwakening, display evidence of administrative monitoring, deleting commentators and posts that violate communal norms. Furthermore, there are strict gender policies enforced on forums like SunniForum and SalafiTalk. Online space tends to be ideologically segregated and controlled. These specific administrative policies and cultural systems limit the ability of marginalized voices to enter public discussion. Alternative voices of dissent are assumed not to exist in these segregated communities. As such, the efficacy of a "new democratic activism"

should be approached more cautiously. Even if the commentators are actually women, queer individuals, or marginalized political groups, these voices are assumed not to exist.

In order to analyze this particular kind of online activity, I focus on two specific NSM platforms. The first is online forums, where any registered users may comment. In this regard, I focused on both English and Arabic language jihadi forums. I also, analyzed Salafi forums that are not explicitly militant but may contain many commentators and threads sympathetic to militant groups and ideology. In June 2013, I archived the forums back to one year and monitored the forums until March 2014 for new content. In some instances, I skipped over threads that I believed were irrelevant to my research (such as discussions of family law or cooking recipes); however, the data is representative of two years of monitoring these forums.

The second platform I researched was Somali and Somali diaspora Twitter accounts. Due to the fact that many Twitter accounts are transient and can be deleted or blocked, I only monitored new activity from June 2013 onward. I collected the data by focusing on responses to official Kenyan Twitter accounts, particularly the Kenyan Defense Forces and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).I monitored responses to these accounts at least once every two weeks. I then used the accounts that responded to the KDF and AMISOM to build networks of affiliated accounts based on Tweet interaction and common followers. Compared to the systemic analysis of forum communities, which was relatively comprehensive, I was unable to analyze micro-blogging platforms as completely. While sample size is impossible to determine, one year of constant monitoring gave me a significant database of accounts and tweet interactions.

At its best, Internet research can only give evidence of broad trends, not definitive proof. There are no P-tests to determine statistical significance or and there is no way to measure a quality sample size. As such, research into cyberspace is only a call to further research.

The Traditional Public Sphere:

The phrase "Public Sphere" has thoroughly entered our common political lexicon. Overwhelmingly, both the common and academic debate about public space is been based on the work of German sociologist Jürgen Habermas. Habermas obviously did not invent the concept of "public;" as a legal term it goes back at least as far as *res publica* in the Roman Republic. However, Habermas lays out a history of the modern conception of a public sphere, as distinct from legal "public things," in <u>The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society</u>.[9] Habermas isolates the genealogical history of the public sphere within French salons and London coffee houses. The distinction is drawn primarily between public and private space. Public space follows the bourgeois concepts of objective common interest, while private space is of individual interest. Furthermore, the most important concept in original Habermassian public space discourse is its geographic, physical nature. The spaces are both physical and political.

For Habermas, these locations form the institutionalization of communicative action,[10] leading to the emancipation of human rationality. Rationality is inherent in language.[11] As such, collective argumentation and discussion in public are reflections of deeper rationality. Habermas has a prescriptive understanding of public communication; not only do argumentation and discussion happen but, when they do, they uncover deeper

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[9]Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1991)

[10] For Habermas' discussion of Communicative Action, see volumes 1 and 2:
Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984)

[11] For contemporary discussions, see:
Axel Honneth and Hans Joas, *Communicative Action: Essays on Jürgen Habermas's The Theory of Communicative Action* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991)

structures of rationality that inform political beliefs and policy. This prescriptive view of communication requires a forum for open dialogue, free from political or ideological coercion. Private space is that space that is removed from the common interest; therefore, by its very nature, it is separate from communicative action.

With communicative action, Habermas moved away from the explicitly physical characterization of the public sphere; instead, he described the public sphere as the arena of speech acts.[12] When people come together and speak or debate about the public interest, this speech act effectively creates the public sphere. However, crucial in the revised conception of public sphere, Habermas stresses the media as a subjective actor that plays an independent role in affecting public discussion. The mass media is a unique actor, separate from other voices, that uniquely contributes to public debate.

Habermas is not without detractors in his views on the public discourse. While most writers accept his distinction between private and public speech, particularly with regard to politics, several commentators criticizes Habermas' prescriptive extolling of communicative action. Several authors, Chantal Mouffe chief among them, have criticized Habermas for ignoring power relations in debate, particularly along racial, class, and gendered lines.[13]

According to these authors, certain voices are privileged while others are minimized. Mouffe places Habermas in the wider tradition of left liberalism with John

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[12] For an overview of Habermas' discussion of the Public Sphere, see:
Jürgen Habermas and Steven Seidman, *Jürgen Habermas on Society and Politics: A Reader* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989): 231-237.
[13] For a detailed discussion of so-called "difference democrats," see:
Lincoln Dahlberg, "The Habermasian Public Sphere: Taking Difference Seriously?" *Theory and Society* 34, no. 2 (April 2005): 111-36.

Rawls, as both believed an individual could suspend bias and prejudice to advocate for the common good. This is not to say that Mouffe rejects Habermas; instead, she and others with similar critiques are attempts to refine his view. Particularly, discursive power structures represent the primary impediment to communicative action.

Freedom from ideological or political coercion is central to Habermas' theory of communicative action. Rationality can only emanate from public argumentation and discussion when that speech is "free." Mouffe and other difference democrats maintain that no speech can ever be free or beyond coercion. Instead, it is limited by discursive structures; an African American woman cannot access public debate in the same way as a white male can. According to Mouffe, public space, in addition to public speech, is also limited by these discursive power structures. Women, ethnic minorities, or queer individuals can be excluded from the physical locations where public debate happens.

Mouffe and other difference democrats thus place two conditions for an open public sphere, according to Habermas a necessary requirement for communicative action. Public spaces must be open to all individuals and, additionally, discursive power structures that privilege certain voices must be deconstructed and eliminated. Naturally, Mouffe is skeptical that this is possible; as such, Mouffe agrees with communicative action in theory, but disagrees with the possibility of coercion free public debate in practice.

Technology and the Expanded Public Sphere:

Habermas' work was published in the mid-1980's and it only describes the public sphere up until the 1970's. While certain technologies, such as the telephone, broke down defined geographic space, communication was still limited to those in a personal network. Public discourse outside personal networks still occurred in defined public space: coffee shops, town hall meetings, etc.. Since that time, advances in technology broke down the geographic and personal aspects of the public sphere. Media ceased to be an independent actor in the public sphere; instead, media allow individuals to break outside their defined personal networks and geographic planes of existence. For Habermas, 20th century mass media, such as radio and television, participate in the public sphere. However, changes in communication technology allowed individuals to disseminate widely their personal views. These technological changes ended mass media as an independent actor in the public sphere. Instead, media are a way for average individuals to participate in the public sphere.

The first radical change in media technology occurred with the introduction of audiocassette tapes. In many ways, the dissemination of audiocassettes mirrors the previous dissemination of old media (cinema, pamphlets, books, newspapers, etc.). That is, few people used them to disseminate their own views; often, people would distribute cassette tapes similar to pamphlets. Disseminating others' work was a political act but this did not mean that average individuals could project their own views very far. Unlike previous forms of communication, the production of audiocassettes could be highly decentralized. With old media, the enormous capital required in the production phase

(whether it be presses, cameras, or large staff) required it to be highly centralized.[14] This centralized production, by nature, gave the creators significant control over dissemination of the medium. By contrast, audiocassettes can be easily recorded, copied, and disseminated by virtually anyone. In the 1970's and 1980's, this decentralized process allowed the dissemination of the *khutubat* and *fatawa* of relatively unknown sheikhs who previously lacked accessed to traditional media and whose views were limited to an immediate environment.[15]

The political effects of audiocassettes were felt most potently during the Iranian Revolution.[16] Prior to the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini recorded sermons in exile from Iran, which were smuggled into Iran and widely copied and disseminated by nearly 200,000 mullahs and 90,000 mosques.[17] This informal media dissemination was an alternative to the Pahlavi regime and allowed individuals widespread access to dissenting views. Many new media scholars have dubbed the Iranian Revolution the "Cassette Revolution," due to the large part the technology played in political activity. However, despite its importance, the physical nature of the technology was fairly limiting. Audiocassettes require a large network of people to copy and disseminate views. Even though these networks were largely informal in Iran, the sheer number of people required

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[14] Hamid Naficy, "Cassettes." In The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World., edited by John L. Esposito. Oxford Islamic Studies Online, http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236MIW/e0140 (accessed 01-Apr-2014).

[15] For an example of this process in Egypt, see:
Charles Hirschkind, "Cassette Ethics: Public Piety and Popular Media in Egypt," *In Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere*, edited by Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors, 29-51 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006)

[16] Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi, "The Power of Tradition: Communication and the Iranian Revolution," Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1985.

[17] Majid Tehranian, *Communication and Revolution in Iran: The Passing of a Paradigm. Iranian Studies* 13.1–4 (1980): 5–30.

for copying and distributing cassettes limited their effectiveness as vehicles public communication to important religious and political figures. Average individuals had almost no opportunity to record and disseminate their views. While audiocassettes played a major role in the Iranian Revolution, it was a now obsolete technology, with virtually no political ramifications, that drastically altered the power of individual voices in the public sphere.

The Telefax, developed by Xerox in 1964, was the first fax machine based on telephone technology. While many businesses and newsrooms had Telefaxes in the 1970's and 1980's, it was only in the 1990's that fax machines were relatively widespread among consumers. The fax machine provided the first opportunity for an average individual, possessing only a phone jack and a list of numbers, to express his or her views beyond a local, personal network.[18] Despite the efforts of many antiroyalist activists to make fax machine politics in Saudi Arabia during the 1990's the "Fax Machine Revolution," no such insurgency materialized. However, individuals, for the first time, were able to disseminate their own writings, at very little cost, to a diverse group of readers outside their personal network. The costs were even lower than audiocassettes and, furthermore, fax machines entirely broke down the physical nature of technology. However, there were some notable limitations to the technology, not least the cost and availability of a machine in the 1990's. Most importantly, an individual had to possess some list of fax numbers to send information. While physical and geographic

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[18] For a detailed history of early Fax machine politics in Saudi Arabia, see:
Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson, *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003)

boundaries were broken down, an individual still had a defined readership, subject to his or her list of numbers.

While access to computers, particularly in the Middle East, was generally limited to wealthy urbanites in the late 1990's and early 2000's, the development of the Internet (or The Web, in 1990's parlance) for the first time allowed private individuals to communicate, entirely anonymously, with users anywhere in the world.[19] Early forum communities not only broke down geographic barriers, allowing a Saudi to chat with an American in Dearborn, for example, but also allowed the average individual to have complete control over production and worldwide dissemination of his or her ideas. Individuals were no longer confined by limited networks; by definition, the ability to communicate anonymously put the societal-changing effects of 20th century mass media in the hands of everyday people. Not only were individuals able to project their voices but they were also able to consume user-generated information from anywhere in the world.

For many scholars, the fact that, with the development of the Internet, individuals were no longer confined by geography, immediate social and familial networks, or centralized production, called for a radical reevaluation of what the "public sphere" means. For many, new media ended Mouffe and others' critique of power relations. Individuals traditionally excluded from the public sphere had access to a medium to share their views. Anonymity in particular allowed groups marginalized from public debate,

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[19] For an excellent discussion of early Muslim forum communities, see:
Gary R. Bunt, *Virtually Islamic: computer-mediated communication and cyber Islamic environments* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000)

such as women, queer people, and secularists, a platform to engage in wider political discussion.

Nowhere was the importance of this development apparent more than in New Social Movement theory. While traditional activism had been defined by associations with hierarchical leaders (e.g. labor bosses, party apparatchik, and community organizers), a new form of political activity began to arise in the 1980's. Rather than political association, these new movements were organized loosely by ideology.[20] This is not to say that previous political organizations were devoid of ideology. Instead, the groups combined ideology with traditional forms of political association. Furthermore, an individual could join these groups for non-ideological reasons; many members of the Communist Party in the USSR joined to experience the social, political, and economic benefits. What separates New Social Movement theory is that individuals can organize without these structures, based only on ideological agreement. While several scholars associated with New Social Movement theory give a great deal of thought to marginalized extremist groups, for example Sidney Tarrow's discussion of the Muslim Brotherhood,[21] the overwhelming theme is that this breakdown in dominant political structures brings new opportunities for previously minimal left-wing groups like ACT UP, anti-capitalist groups, and radical eco-terrorists. Tarrow sees al-Qaeda as symptomatic of the dominant political structures; al-Qaeda is simply a result of US backed Mujahedeen in Afghanistan, which gave political space to Islamists. Instead, I

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[20] Castells sees this trend as affecting all aspects of human life, from work to time to death. However, his work is an excellent starting point for New Social Movement theory, see:
Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 1996)
[21] For a relatively comprehensive treatment of this trend, see:
Sidney G. Tarrow. *The New Transnational Activism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005)

will argue as a caveat the al-Qaeda inhabits the same fragmented political space as Greenpeace. While changes in communication technology have allowed for significant political activity outside established political structures, this widened political space is not unidirectional.

Limitations of the "Widened Public Sphere"

The major problem with this understanding of the development of the Internet leading to a widened public sphere is the tendency to see the enlargement as unidirectional.[22] As a general rule, governments have marginalized both the far left and the far right.[23] Most authors have extolled the virtues of a new medium for women, queer people, secularists, and other marginalized groups, while ignoring that far-right, anti-democratic voices have often been excluded from political organization as well. By breaking down geographic and networked boundaries, new media breaks down structures in both directions. In America, this has resulted in a resurgence of far-right survivalist Internet boards; while in many parts of the world, radical Islamists are exploiting a new political space.

Furthermore, authors have tended to see this new online space as open space, or at least more open than traditional physical public space. In many ways, this is true. Particularly, women and people of color have more access to media dissemination. However, a general opening of public debate does not mean all of these spaces are "open." In fact, online space tends to be highly moderated and partitioned, particularly at the far ends of the political spectrum. This ideological moderating takes two forms. The first is hard moderating, where dissenting views are deleted and alternative commentators are banned. The second is discursive moderating, where particular language codes a space as a certain type of space, whether that space is anarchist, male, Salafi, or feminist.

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[22] A notable exception to this is Gary Bunt's work on Jihadi Online forums.

[23] There are, of course, many notable exceptions. From Francoist Falanges to El Salvadoran death squads to the purge of White Russians after the Bolshevik Revolution. However, in general, governments have suppressed Islamists, Anarchists, Communists, Right-wing militias, and fascists with all around impunity.

Furthermore, this language can often code a space as gendered, even when the space may not be explicitly male or female.

There are profound methodological difficulties in demonstrating that online space is highly moderated. For starters, one is trying to prove a negative, that the absence of dissent is evidence of hard moderating. However, there are several elements that provide evidence for hard moderating. The first is the percentage of commentators who are banned on older threads. Most open forums rarely ban users except for explicit violations of forum rules. Meanwhile, heavily policed forums or comment sections often have a higher percentage of banned users. While forums will often show the older members who have been banned, the comments sections of blogs will often erase evidence of their existence. For blogs, dissent on other blogs or forums regarding the policing policies of certain platforms is often good evidence that such behavior is happening. These factors are soft and difficult to prove; however, in general they provide evidence for the existence of the moderating policies of a certain blog. Most importantly, heavily moderated platforms often have ambiguous rules that can be used to remove dissenting views, while more open blogs usually have extremely hard rules that will usually result in a warning before a banning.

As an example, one of the most prominent Salafi forums is the UK-based IslamicAwakening. Looking to forums from year ago, nearly 20% of contributors are listed as banned. The first rule of the forum is to "adhere to correct Islamic adab (etiquette) while discussing or debating issues."[24] Furthermore, rather than a warning,

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[24] Forums.islamicawakening.com/f21/rules-and-regulations-1846

violations result in "an immediate ban."[25] The coupling of a rather ambiguous etiquette rule[26] with harsh immediate banning policy, combined with a very high rate of banned users, is good evidence of high moderator policing. On the other end of the political spectrum, the pro-fat feminist blog, Shakesville, uses safe space and anti-trigger rhetoric to police its content. While all evidence of that moderating has been removed, there are significant numbers of blogs and micro-blogs run primarily by women of color, which have criticized Shakesville's heavy-handed policing policies.[27] It is worth mentioning one of the criticisms at length:

> "Over the past 10 to 15 years in particular, feminist spaces have been concerned with and consumed by an Ahab like quest for building and enforcing "safe space." As women of color, who live under white supremacy, settler colonialism, heteronormativity, capitalism and more, we know that such a place doesn't actually exist. More importantly, what we have seen over the years is that "safe spaces" usually mean excluding us. They sometimes mean using "safety" as a substitute for "never uncomfortable spaces." In this conceptualization, safety is often used as a cudgel to silence and to further marginalize."[28]

While it is impossible to prove the absence of something (e.g. dissent), evidence through alternative mediums of moderator policing gives credence to the theory that online space is not nearly as open as much of the literature would like us to believe.

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[25] Ibid.

[26] As a note, IslamicAwakening has extremely rigid rules on gender relations. These will be discussed in-depth later regarding gendered space online.

[27] "Shakesfail" and "Drink the Shaker Kool-Aid" are two notable exambles.

[28] *Shakesfail* (blog). Entry posted February 12, 2014. Accessed March 8, 2014. http://shakesville.tumblr.com/.

Beyond hard moderating, the language of forums and blogs and their contributors often discursively marks a space. Often, this can be in the title, as in the Arabic language Sahab Salafi Network, clearly demarcating the space. However, certain, less obvious, behaviors can also mark a space. Blogs where even short posts begin with the *bismalah* or the *shahada* universally occur in every post are almost always Salafi in orientation. Furthermore, certain forums can gender space by referring to everyone as brother (whether or not there are women on the forum).

The implications of this moderating are significant. Traditional literature on the subject has emphasized the value of anonymous female and queer voices in traditionally male space. However, I will argue that because these voices are assumed *not* to exist due to moderating, the impact of these voices is marginalized. Whether a female is anonymously commenting in a male forum is less important than whether the male space believes the voice is female. I will argue that lacking physical and social cues, online space tends to rely on highly ideological and gendered language to partition the Internet and form groups. While new media does cause a widening of the public sphere, this new space tends to reflect ideological and gendered differences of physical space.

The New Public Sphere in Practice:

In order to study how online space can be partitioned along ideological and gendered line, I focused on two different types of partitioned space on forum communities as well as the microblogging platform Twitter.

Salafi Internet Boards:

When we discuss online communities, the question is always about authority. Whether it be religion or political ideology, a member is only considered part of the group because some tradition has issued a verdict that they are allowed to be there. Islamist Internet boards mix these two elements, attempting to solidify religious and ideological authority.

In terms of establishing religious authority, a particular kind of new media is especially important. Forums, blogs, and micro-blogging platforms (such as Twitter or Tumbler) are fairly interactive. A commentator or member is able to respond to, disseminate, or block/remove certain types of material from their own online experience. However, an important subset of new media is media repositories. In a religious context, these sites have extensive, downloadable PDFs or photocopies of religious texts. Often, a majority of the texts will be *fiqh* texts. However, the site may also include *anasheed*, *fatawaa*, or examples of *tajweed*. Compared to forums and blogs, the sites are far less interactive. A person will simply use the site to access an extremely large repository of texts; the sites function as free online libraries. Occasionally, sites will allow visitors to

rate texts with a star system[29] or crowdsource the texts, which requires much more interactions.[30]

English language media repositories are slightly different. The ability to download books is often part of a much larger media project. English language sites will devote significant space to Arabic language learning tools,[31] Arabic typography programs, information for new converts, and explanations of *suwar* and *sunan*.[32][33] There are also several websites devoted to creating a searchable database of a particular text, normally either a specific *tafsir*[34] work or the Qur'an.[35] While these sites are relatively closed (e.g. the generally lack message boards or forums), they provide a major source of religious authority on other forums and blogs.

The use of the textual repositories is most apparent on jihadi forums when discussing three key issues. The first is whether jihad allows one to kill innocents not engaged in combat. The second is whether it is acceptable to kill other Muslims during

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[29] For an Arabic Language example of a textual repository that allows user ratings, see: www.alkottob.com

[30] An excellent example of a crowdsourced textual website in Arabic, see: www.qwled.com

[31] The language learning tools are not explicitly religious. A PDF version of Alan Jones' Arabic through the Qur'an is extremely popular on these sites, see:
Alan Jones, *Arabic through the Qur'ān*, (Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 2005)

[32] One example of this type of site is www.kalamullah.com. It includes *tajweed* instruction, information for converts, tools for learning Arabic, free books, and downloadable *fatawaa*. The free books are mainly open source religious texts that have been translated and published by Saudi presses.

[33] Another example is www.allahsword.net (Allah's word not Allah Sword) which includes free books along with Arabic typing software, downloadable computer wallpapers, and PDF versions of *tafsir*.

[34] www.qtafsir.com allows a reader to look up any passage of the Qur'an and see Ibn Kathir's commentary.

[35] Corpus.quran.com is a secular website run by Ph.D. students at Leeds; however, it is extremely popular among Muslims as well. It provides a searchable database of every word in the Qur'an, grammatical sentence mapping for each verse, and a concordance like tree of concepts in the Qur'an. While there is a message board, this is relegated to comments about translation and grammar, not religion.

the course of battle. The third concerns whether it is permissible to commit suicide[36] in the name of jihad. It is the first two questions that form the bulk of debate and where the interaction with online religious texts is most widespread. The first question, concerning the killing of civilians, was addressed (in the view of certain groups) by 8th century jurist Muhammad al-Shaybani. Al-Shaybani addressed the question in terms of siege warfare. Specifically, whether it acceptable to fire a mangonel at a city during a siege if it would almost certainly kill some non-combatants who resided there. Al-Shaybani determined this was acceptable in the context of siege warfare. The second question, of killing Muslims as collateral damage during warfare, was addressed by Ibn Taymiyyah. After the Mongol invasion, the question arose, during the attempt to retake Mongol held cities where Muslims lived, was it acceptable to kill Muslims living there in the course of the siege? While the killing of Muslims is explicitly forbidden under shari'a, Ibn Taymiyyah concluded that this was permissible under the "doctrine of the shield." That is, if an enemy used civilians or Muslims as a human shield, it was permissible that they die in the course of killing the enemy. While these specific legal doctrines have little applicability to suicide bombings or other "martyrdom operations,"[37] these legal ideas are often discussed in this context online.

The normal course of this discussion is that a forum member will ask a question about the permissibility of suicide bombings, military actions with large civilian

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[36] In military *fiqh*, this question is usually addressed as entering a battle where the odds would almost certainly equal death. Many jihadis mistake this jurisprudence for a defense of suicide; however, certain schools (Shafai'is in particular) defend the practice precisely because there is a possibility, however remote, of survival.

[37] An example of a "martyrdom operation" is the 1994 Beslan school siege in Chechnya. School children were considered valid targets and the operation was assumed to be near-suicidal for the militants. After the fact, is was sometimes justified by the "doctrine of the shield."

casualties, etc.. Another commentator will then respond with "Ibn Taymiyya[38] supports such actions under the "doctrine of the shield" and provide a link, from one of the textual repositories, to a 700 page PDF document of *fatawaa*. There is never discussion of military *fiqh*, Mohammad's early military actions,[39] or relevant chapters in the Qur'an. Instead, the "sheikh al-Islam" has authority in his own right. By providing a link to the entire collection of *fatawaa*, the post, and its commentary on warfare, is given religious authority. Often, the post will not even quote from the text; it will simply provide the link as though this is self-evident. The texts are not studied; instead, the texts themselves are *evidence* of authority.

Earlier, I discussed the UK-based Salafi forum IslamicAwakening, particularly, how its loose forum rules allow for controlling and moderating ideology. The forum explicitly bans "anything that may *incriminate* you for 'glorifying' or 'inciting' terrorism'…[which is] illegal under UK law"[40] (emphasis added). However, commentators may "discuss theoretical aspects [of jihad] in theological terms without specifying a place or time."[41] Additionally, while "links to Jihad videos will be removed,"[42] the forum is clear it is acceptable as long as it is not the "<u>primary platform</u> to disseminate highly controversial political material (such as latest al-Qaeda , IRA, Tamil Tiger news, etc.)"[43] (emphasis in original). However, as long as a post "is linked to its

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[38] As a note, Ibn Taymiyyah is almost always referred to as the "sheikh al-Islam," not by his name.
[39] Interestingly, in much of military *fiqh*, it is Abu Bakr's actions during the Ridda Wars that is especially important.
[40] Forums.islamicawakening.com/f21/rules-and-regulations-1846
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.

primary source,"[44] it is acceptable. The results of these loose, ambiguous rules are

popular threads (as of writing) such as "al-Shabaab winning hearts & minds of the

public"[45] and "Islamic State 'strong enough to occupy Baghdad.'"[46] While these threads

contain content that violates the "incitement to violence rules," they provide links to other

jihadi news organizations and forums; the "primary source" and "abstract theological

debate" clauses give a great deal of leeway to those who are in ideological agreement

with the community. Unsurprisingly, similar platforms are not open for Shi'i Islamists,

Marxists, or Lebanese Christian Militias. Although, there is the "Slaughter of ahlul

Sunnah in Iran"[47] thread which criticizes the "so-called Islamic revolution in Iran,"

amassing 300 views in only 3 days. However, there still is some moderating, often

pushed by European anti-hate speech laws. For example, on March 31st, 2014, a thread on

"The possibility of a pure Sunni Middle East" was removed, likely because several

commentators had actively advocated for a purge of Shi'is and Christians. However, it is

clear from the rules that these blogs have, at the core of their moderating policies, a desire

to stay within the law in the broadest sense possible. A great deal of leeway is given to

those in broad agreement with the ideology of the forum in general.

These sites often use weak moderating policies (for those who agree in tone and

ideology) to link to official organs of jihadi groups. For example, it is easy to find links to

as-Sahab, the official media outlet of al-Qaeda, on the Salafi forum SalafiTalk.[48] Even

though a commentator may be forbidden, especially in a European context, from

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[44] Ibid.
[45] At the time of writing it had over 500 views in only 5 days.
[46] At writing it had 4373 views.
[47] Forums.islamicawakening.com/f18/slaughter-of-ahlul-sunnah-in-Iran-69510/
[48] www.salafitalk.net

explicitly inciting people to violence, links take other commentators to official jihadi media organizations that do. The informal forum networks and official public relations organs have a symbiotic relationship. Forum commentators can circumvent hate speech laws by posting al-Qaeda affiliated links with a "what do you think of this?" Meanwhile, the official media accounts depend on the informal networks to disseminate press releases and new information, as traditional media often refuses to do so.[49]

This symbiotic relationship is particularly apparent with al-Qaeda's two high profile magazines, *Inspire* and *al-Shamikha*. Some journalists and commentators, such as Max Fischer writing in the *Atlantic*, believe the magazines to be elaborate hoaxes. While it is unlikely the magazines are tied to high-level leadership, both were distributed by *as-Sahab* and are believed to originate from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. *Inspire* is a high gloss, English-language publication targeted at youth in the United States and the UK. While print editions do exist, the magazine is primarily disseminated on online forums. It is currently in its 12th edition. The most recent edition encouraged recruits to launch car bombs in major American cities,

> Many Feisal Shahzads are residing inside America and all they need is the knowledge of how to make car bombs….The American government was unable to protect its citizens from pressure cooker bombs in backpacks, I wonder if they are ready to stop car bombs! And the good news is…you can prepare it in the kitchen of your mom too.[50]

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[49] The notable exception is Al-Jazeera's decision to broadcast Osama Bin Laden's tapes on the official network.
[50] Homegrown Islamic Extremism in 2013: The Perils of Online Recruitment & Self-Radicalization (New York, NY: Anti-Defamation League, 2014)

At the same time, al-Qaeda also announced the release of a new English language magazine entitled *Resurgence*[51]. New issues are met with considerable fanfare on Jihadi websites as well as extended press coverage.

The second major al-Qaeda publication is *al-Shamikha*, an Arabic-language magazine geared towards women. While it only ran for one issue in March 2011, making the ties to al-Qaeda leadership even weaker, it is still widely discussed online. This is due, in no small part, to its very interesting content. Columns that extoll the benefits of marrying a mujahid are placed haphazardly next to cooking tips. One woman wrote a self-reflection of having her husband participate in a suicide attack.

These high gloss magazines generate a significant amount of coverage in American and European news; the Daily Mail sarcastically referred to *al-Shamikha* as a jihadi's Cosmo.[52] Al-Qaeda relies on forums, as well as the significant Western media coverage, to widely disseminate the magazines.

Forums can also use the aforementioned discursive monitoring to define the ideology of a site. In many conservative Salafi and jihadi forums, every post will begin with the *bismallah*, normally reserved for long speeches or books. Furthermore, many commentators will include the *shahada* at the end of their posts or in their biography. These practices do not serve a theological purpose; instead, they serve to reify the religious authority, and specific ideology, of the commentators.

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[51] Ibid.
[52] The Daily Mail (London). "Glossy 'Jihad Cosmo' combines beauty tips with suicide bombing advice." March 13, 2011.

These processes tend to create closed ideological communities. Commentators discuss Americans as "kuffar" as a matter of fact, not as a matter of Islamic law. Unread 700 page PDF files grant the commentators a certain amount of religious authority while links to official jihadi media outlets can be used to circumvent European anti-hate speech laws.

Gendered Online Space:

In addition to having a high degree of ideological homogeneity, online forums tend to be highly gendered. Salafi religious sites tend to take three forms with regard to gender. The first are sites that are clearly geared towards Muslim women. However, as we shall see, many women on the sites are aware of the fact that men are participating, even if they are not explicitly doing so. The second type of site is presumed to be entirely male. Whether or not women are actually participating is somewhat of a moot point as they are not seen to be participating. The third type of site is a mixed-gender online space. However, these sites often enforce strict online behavior based on gender, restricting commentators of a certain gender from participating in certain sections of the website or from interacting with users of another gender.

Sites that are dedicated forums for Muslim women are extremely widespread online. One of the most popular Arabic language sites is *Hawaa World*. The site is geared towards non-working women and a majority of the threads are tips to improve daily life; it includes sections on cooking, pregnancy and motherhood, decorating ideas, and others.[53] There is also a large section on personal budgeting and ideas for at-home businesses. Particularly, there are many posts on stock trading. However, these very practical threads are also interspersed with religious themed threads. There is an extremely active section on living properly as Muslim women; it includes religious counsel as well as advice for memorizing the Qur'an. As of writing, it had over 100,000 threads and nearly 2,000,000 posts.

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[53] Forum.hawaaworld.com

While the site is exclusively targeted at Muslim women, there is evidence that the commentators are aware of men on the forums. The "Beauty and Elegance" section is also extremely popular. Interestingly, in the section description, it specifically asks men not to enter this particular area of the website. Other sites, such as *Islam Way Sisters*, a subset of the major *da'wah* (proselytizing) website *Islam Way*, take a much stricter approach. *Islam Way Sisters* only has closed threads; that is, only registered users can even enter sections to view open threads. The only thread open to the public is one that provides information about Islam for non-Muslims, fitting the wider *da'wah* theme of *Islam Way*.[54]

While sites targeting Muslim women have most of the same religious resources such as tools for memorizing the Qur'an and studying the hadith, there are some important differences. Most of the sites entirely ignore the conversations about fiqh that make up a significant portion of the previously discussed forums. However, Muslim women forums often have unique forms of religious expression that are quite rare elsewhere. One of these unique platforms is dedicated threads where a verified sheikh can answer questions that people have.[55] Another prominent mode of religious expression on Muslim women forums is personalized dream interpretation.

Dream interpretation is, in no way, a specifically female activity. As a practice, sanctioned dream interpretation goes back to the time of the Prophet. Additionally, hundreds of sites have appeared on the Internet, allowing an individual to search general terms for common themes. MyIslamicDream is one of the most popular sites for this kind

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[54] Sisters.islamway.net/forum/
[55] Ibid.

of broad-search dream interpretation.[56] However, personalized dream interpretation, whether over the phone, email, or chat, is extremely popular. Yet, in many ways, this online personalized dream interpretation is under attack from a variety of fronts.

Several religious leaders have criticized the validity of dreams to make predictions. A fatwa[57] issued by Sheikh 'Atiyyah Saqr, former head of Azhar's Fatwa committee, is featured on dozens of English-language Salafi blogs:

> As for interpretation of dreams, this issue is certainly one of hidden secrets known only to Almighty Allah, the Knower of the Unseen. So all that is written or said of the interpretation of dreams is just a matter of personal reasoning and is not reliable. This is because this issue is one of the Unseen matters that have something to do with spirits and their interaction with outer worlds. It is not true that it has certain laws; it is merely based on opinions through which some people issued many books claiming to be authoritative reference on interpreting dreams.[58]

The implication is obvious. Dream interpretation is simply a personal opinion about religion; furthermore, when most dream interpretation occurs in informal settings, conducted by lay people, it is an uninformed religious opinion that should hold virtually no weight. Al-Qaradawi holds a similar view, "while not denying the theoretical possibility of dream-visions, [he] tries to contain their effectiveness."[59] Saleh bin Abdul-

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[56] www.myislamicdream.com

[57] While the text is cited verbatim on dozens of forums and cited as I have cited it here, I was unable to confirm the existence of the actual fatwa. However, it is quoted widely within other fatawa and regularly cited. Even if the attribution is apocryphal, the "fatwa" plays an active role in limiting the validity of dream interpretation.

[58] Saqr, 'Atiyyah. Letter, "Fatwa on the Interpretation of Dreams," August 10, 2003.

[59] Amira Mittermaier, *Dreams that Matter: Egyptian Landscapes of the Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 45.

Aziz al ash-Sheikh, the minister of Islamic Affairs, Endowments, Call and Guidance of Saudi Arabia holds a similar view on the matter.[60]

Moreover, these theological attitudes often exist in tandem with official efforts to limit certain kinds of dream interpretation. On April 20, 2009, the aforementioned Saleh bin Abdul-Aziz al ash-Sheikh issued an opinion that Saudi Arabia should curb dream interpreters who take payment for their work. The argument is that, as dreams are intangible, the transaction cannot meet the concreteness requirements of a *bay'ah* (a sale).[61] Saudi scholar Sheikh bin Abdullah al-Fawzan used a similar argument in a March 2014 opinion declaring buffets haram because an individual cannot guarantee the amount of food they are buying when entering a buffet style restaurant. Ash-Sheikh's opinion led to a Saudi crackdown on email and phone correspondence dream interpretation in the Kingdom.

While women are not the only people who seek out dream interpretation, Muslim women forums are one the major ways the phone numbers and emails of dream interpreters are disseminated. *Hawaa World* has two entire sections dedicated to dream interpretation. When dream interpretation is discussed on other forums, it is often in broad "general discussion" sections. The fact that many Muslim women forums give dedicated space to a specific kind of religious practice is rather unique and creates a unique kind of religious activity on these sites.

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[60] Amira Mittermaier, *Dreams that Matter: Egyptian Landscapes of the Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 46.

[61] That is, a person must be able to concretely define the terms of the purchase for it to be valid.

While dream interpretation plays a major role on Muslim women forums, the practice is virtually absent from sites that primarily discuss *fiqh* or political activity. However, these sites go even farther, often using specific gendered language to code women out of religious and political conversations. On some forums, commentators exclusively refer to each other as "brothers" rather than "brothers and sisters." Muslim women are assumed not to exist on these forums and it creates a culture of "these topics are clearly for men." Even though women may be commentating and participating in these forums, they are assumed not to be. SalafiTalk is a major site where the commentators exclusively refer to each other as brothers.

There are also sites where both men and women comment freely. However, they often have strict moderating policies to maintain gender separation. IslamicAwakening has 7 rules to guide gender interactions on the website,

> 1. Smiling or winking emoticons directed at the opposite gender are not allowed. 2. LOLing directly at the opposite gender's posts is not allowed. 3. Joking with the opposite gender is not allowed. 4. Excessively praising the opposite gender is not allowed. 5. Flattering the opposite gender is not allowed. 6. Declaring your love (for the sake of Allah) to the opposite gender is not allowed. 7. Friend requests should not be made to the opposite gender; this is considered free-mixing and will be moderated.[62]

IslamicAwakening attempts to mirror the strictest understanding of gender separation in online space. While women are invited to participate in various discussions, they are closed off from engaging with other commentators in many ways. A common feature of forum communities worldwide are direct messages, where forum conversations can be

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[62] http://forums.islamicawakening.com/f21/rules-and-regulations-1846/

extended privately and commentators can begin to build online networks. However, restrictions on "private" communication greatly limit women's ability to form these online communities.

Islamic sites that are explicitly mixed gender almost always require a person to identify their gender in their profile. This is true in English language sites like IslamicAwakening and SunniForum as well as Arabic language sites. This feature allows the site to restrict access to certain sections as being "Brothers Only" or "Sisters Only," as well as enforce strict rules about communication between individuals of a different gender.

Online space undoubtedly creates new space for women to communicate. However, women do not have access to all of this space equally. While Muslim women forums, like *Hawaa World*, allow women to create specific communities relevant to their daily lives, many other sites have systems in place to exclude them. Many sites used administrative policies to restrict access to specific sites or regulate communication between women and men. Furthermore, language coding, such as referring to fellow commentators only as brothers signifies the community as male, where women are neither invited nor seen to be participating. Due to the anonymity afforded by online space, women almost certainly do participate in the forums. However, when they are perceived not to exist in these communities, the impact of their voices is limited. Thus, when thinking of a new public sphere opened by the Internet, it is important to understand that this new space still reflects many of the same limitations as physical space. Following Mouffe's critique of Habermas, online space still possesses certain

discursive power assumptions and well as coercion that limits the voices of excluded

groups.

Microblogging and al-Shabaab:

Nowhere are the methodological problems of understanding online social media more apparent than with the micro-blogging platform, Twitter. Unlike blogs and forums, Twitter is not a closed community that can be policed. New accounts are regularly created, reported, and shut down, making an adequate sample size virtually impossible to collect. Furthermore, unless a biography explicitly provides a location, it is impossible to tell if a person is tweeting from Baghdad, London, or Omaha. At its best, Twitter can only be very rough qualitative research, where the causation and implication of trends must be tentatively gleaned. That being said, perhaps more so than any platform, Twitter relies on language coding in tweets and biographies to define an audience.

Twitter fights between official government accounts have become media sensations of late. The online spat between the official Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and the Palestinian al-Qassam Brigades' accounts in 2012, for example, received widespread international news coverage. A similar phenomenon developed between media spokespeople for M23 rebels in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) Twitter handle. However, significantly less attention has been paid to non-official accounts and their role in creating propaganda and disseminating threats. This kind of Twitter behavior has been especially prominent with al-Shabaab affiliated accounts in Somalia and the Somali diaspora worldwide. A loose, unorganized coalition of users regularly threatens prominent Kenyan officials, disseminates information about Somali martyrs, and

highlights (or creates) abuses by African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM)—the official UN peacekeeping force—and the Kenyan Defense Forces.

Differentiating between al-Shabaab affiliated accounts and those of sympathetic Somali diaspora is difficult. However, there are several general trends that can inform educated guesses. Through systematically looking at biographies of specific Twitter handles, I was able to find some general trends. Biographies that include "Somali and Proud," "Somali Pride," or (in Arabic) "Somalii wa iftkhir" are almost exclusively Somali diaspora, located primarily in London. This goes for those on "#TeamSOMALIA" as well. The diaspora accounts tend to be older and far more established, following more people and having more followers. I was also able to determine that they will also speak in educated English, with proper grammar and spelling. Almost all of the accounts use British spellings, reflecting the large Somali diaspora in the UK.

The accounts thus identified as diaspora-based, as a general rule, are far less radical and tweet at official accounts such as @amisomsomalia (the official UN account) or @KDFinfo (the official Kenyan Defense Forces account). User @Ali_Waaye, for example, who describes himself as having a "Body in London, Mind in Somalia," tweeted @KDFinfo on February 12th, 2014, "stop showing us propaganda…show us the war crimes you are committing." And again on the same day, "#Kenya's murder squad aka KDF are criminals and mass murderers." User @KingYusufYusuff, who has a Gandhi quote in his biography, tweeted on February 10th, "#Somalia army invades Mogadishu homes…let us hope they will not end up abusing innocent people." These

tweets are fairly representative of the diaspora's focus on war crimes and as @KingYusufYusuff says, "the inept gov [and] AMISOM." However, the diaspora does occasionally launch threats at official accounts, such as when the aforementioned @Ali-Waaye tweeted @KDFinfo, "I am sure we will pay you filthy enemies of #Somalia back one day and kill a lot [of you]." These threats are exceptions to the norm of stressing good governance and minimizing war crimes.

Despite the difficulty in locating the origins of the diaspora accounts, the differences between them and two other kinds of accounts that regularly interact with Kenyan officials are significant. These other types of accounts tend to be far more radical, issuing death threats, promising to murder Kenyan soldiers, and openly expressing a desire for martyrdom. These accounts are likely affiliated with either international jihadi organizations or local al-Shabaab affiliates. Determining the origins of these accounts is nothing more than educated guesswork, although there are some very prominent clues.

Many of the Somali diaspora accounts appear to support al-Shabaab as a nationalistic obligation. The stress on good governance and human rights is markedly different that the other two types of accounts, which engage and reify wider Salafi-Jihadi discussions of kuffar, martyrdom, etc..

The first of these latter two types of accounts is fairly prominent in wider Jihadi religious communities. Like the diaspora, the accounts are very large and established; they tend to be over a year old with thousands of followers. They serve as a news aggregator for wider jihadi communities. Most of the tweets are in Arabic, providing up

to date news on recent attacks in Syria and Iraq, listing the martyrs and those who they killed. However, these accounts will occasionally engage with current events in Somalia, almost always in English. Their knowledge of Arabic is fairly unique among those who tweet at Kenyan officials and they are intimately connected to jihadi movements worldwide. An excellent example of this kind of account is @AbuSaidsud, who has 2,810 followers and over 8,500 tweets. The account tweets only in English and perfect, grammatically correct Fusha. On February 1st, he/she tweeted "photo for martyr ISAA ABD ALLAH [a nome de guerre] may Allah have mercy on him #killingMuslimsinMombasa #Westgate #Somalia." The tweet also included a picture of an anonymous man who had been shot to death. On October 6th, 2013 the account got in a debate with an anti-terrorism account likely based in Kenya,[63] tweeting, "Insha'Allah my turn will come with car bomb myself and take many kafirs to hell[.] Crazy huh." These tweets are fairly typical for non-diaspora accounts; however, as we will see, there are some important differences between the structure of the account and those we can guess are from Somalia. Importantly, while the account predominantly tweeted in Arabic, the tweets about Somalia were always in English. While it may be easy to write off such tweets as propaganda, few Somalis speak English and even fewer have Twitter. The question is what audience did the writer expect to read the threats?

The third kind of account is structurally very different from the other two. The nature of these accounts points to them being located in Somalia. Unlike the other accounts, they tend to be highly transient. Often, they exist for only a week or so before

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[63] The account positively engages with @MajorEChirchir, the official KDF spokesperson, and @AMISOMSomalia

being deleted or taken down; they amass few followers and a majority of their tweets are threats directed at Kenyan officials. Furthermore, compared to the diaspora, their English tweets are full of spelling errors and they display a general lack of knowledge of English syntax. There are also occasional tweets in Somali and Arabic. However, the Arabic tweets are almost universally limited to the Qur'an and hadith. What is most interesting is that many of the Arabic tweets include short vowels, suggesting the text was simply copy and pasted from the Internet, rather than being typed out. No native speakers of Arabic use short vowels in microblogging platforms like Twitter. They take an extremely long time to type out and the process is tedious. Therefore, it is likely that any tweets that contain short vowels were copied from the Internet, where the practice is slightly more common. As al-Shabaab lacks a formal Twitter profile, these accounts operate as informal public relations. Unlike al-Qaeda, al-Shabaab's formal media apparatuses were shut down quite comprehensively two years ago. There is no longer an official Twitter account or a Facebook page. As such, al-Shabaab relies on these informal networks of supporters to disseminate information.

Tracking these accounts is difficult because they are highly transient; therefore, gathering a representative sample is virtually impossible. Nevertheless, @suleimanwanyony provides a fairly good example. With only 41 followers and 72 tweets, the account stopped tweeting January 28th 2014, after around a month and a half of activity. Without tweeting at anyone, on December 18th, 2013, he tweeted, "The latest recruits have the same military training as the Westgate attackers." Two days before, he tweeted (again at no one in particular), "well done my brother 4 not letting kenya forgte

our role. 'Grenade attack in Eastleigh&twin explosion in Wajir.'" Although, he would also occasionally tweet at people, such as the Standard, a major Kenyan newspaper, with, "there is No value for Kenyan money here fraud Kafirs" on January 2nd, 2014. @mujahiidat is another example of this account. His bio is simply "If Dying is once in a lifetime, why not make it a martyrdom operation?" Typical of this type of account, he regularly interacted with Kenyan military officials, particularly @MajorEChirchir, the KDF military spokesman. After a standard tweet on December 29th, 2013 about praying for a safe return for soldiers, @mujahiidat responded, "rathr a retrn in cofins as thy went 2somaia 2kill s th wl b killed #forgetsecurityinkenya as u r in somalia." The broken English and bad syntax is a common theme; on the same day, "no safety for enemies of Allah who came to destroy the shriah.everywhere they stop on the earth explodes with them..#jihadmomments." These accounts also retweet extensively; particularly anti-Semitic and anti-American pictures. One picture that regularly makes rounds warns Muslims against visiting certain anti-Islam websites. However, with a large skull, the picture describes how, "JEWS have intentionally developed these websites to spread wrong information… so PLZ SEND this msg to as many muslims as possible. AlhamduLillah , These websites are blocked in Saudi Arabia."

The most puzzling question is the role these accounts possibly fill. The tweets are almost exclusively in English and few Somalis have Twitter. To read the tweets as simple propaganda simply underscores that these accounts are unlikely to be read by local Somalis. Furthermore, the small follower count and the limited time these accounts actually exist and are active calls into question their reach and impact. Most likely, the

only people who read the tweets are the Kenyan officials who they target and the Kenyans and Western journalists who read the officials' Tweets. Since Tweet responses are linked to the original tweet and can be viewed by everyone, the Tweets are viewed by Kenyans and journalists who follow these accounts for news on the situation in Somalia.

In many ways, these tweets closely mirror Bin Laden's early *fatawaa* issued under the World Islamic Front for Combat Against the Jews and Crusaders.[64] These *fatawaa* played no significant role in al-Qaeda's operational capabilities. While they may have boosted morale among low level soldiers, the primary purpose of the documents was to instill fear among Americans and their allies.[65] These documents were, most importantly, a form of verbal terror. The loosely organized al-Shabaab affiliated twitter accounts and their allies in the diaspora and international jihadi movements underwent the same transition to increasingly decentralized control experienced within wider media changes. Twitter, and similar platforms, removes control of the production and dissemination of political statements away from group leaders, placing it in the hands of rank-and-file members. Of course, this process has also mirrored the dissolution of the more rigid hierarchical structure of al-Qaeda that existed in the 1990's, largely due to the effects of the War on Terror. Nevertheless, new media fragments the ability of leaders and organizers to effectively manage a message. The physical location of the accounts,

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[64] For a description of the globalization of suicide attacks and transnational terrorism, with a focus on al-Qaeda, see:
Assaf Moghadam, *The globalization of martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the diffusion of suicide attacks* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008)

[65] For a description of al-Qaeda's operational structure and capabilities contemporary with the 9/11 attacks, see:
Yonah Alexander and Michael S. Swetnam, *Usama bin Laden's al-Qaida: profile of a terrorist network* (Ardsley, NY: Transnational Publishers, 2001)

whether it be London or Mogadishu, is no longer relevant. An unorganized group of ideological affiliated individuals is able to fulfill the role of a press office through decentralized control of production and dissemination of information.

Most importantly, this loosely-associated group of individuals that spans the globe is able to maintain this level of ideological cohesion outside of closed blogs and forums. If there truly is a "widened public sphere," it is on public microblogging platforms. As long as the privacy settings for the account are set to public, anyone in the world can read, retweet, and reply to anyone else in the world. This ideological cohesion is maintained by specific practices of language coding, such as the "Somali Pride" among the London diaspora, which create unity in open space. Furthermore, these ideological attacks are attempts to control public space, limiting access and partitioning the space into an ideological battleground.

The Partitioned Public Sphere:

Considering the divisions present in online space, it is worth considering whether the theoretical paradigms of New Social Movement theory and Eickelman, Anderson, and Bunt's postulating of a widened Public Sphere are still useful for understanding activism in cyberspace. The answer must be a resounding yes. New online social media has drastically changed the way individuals are able to produce and disseminate information. For the first time in history, the average individual possesses the ability to project his or her voice beyond geographical space, outside the confines of personal networks. In both a geographic and networked sense, the public sphere is indeed expanded.

However, I would like to add some simple caveats. Firstly, this widening is not unidirectional. It not only gives a platform to historically marginalized voices like women and queer individuals, it also allows reactionary, anti-democratic individuals, also historically cut off from mainstream political activity, political space. Furthermore, the fact that the public sphere is wider does not mean that it is universally more open. While changes in communication technology have broken down conceptions of geographic space, cyberspace still reflects the power structures and ideological coercion that exist in physical space. Whether the space is gendered, political, or religious, cyberspace tends to reflect the same, traditional exclusionary boundaries that exist in physical space.

Salafi Internet boards are a prime example of partitioned online space. Heavy-handed administrative policing excludes dissenting voices. Furthermore, a space can be coded, by the language used, as belonging to a specific ideology. It is important to place

words like Jihad, kaffir, and martyr within a wider jihadist, intellectual context. Understanding jihad only in the context of medieval warfare jurisprudence does nothing to illuminate how jihad is used in particular militant Salafi groups today. Language practices within a closed community define a space as belonging to a particular group.

Whether or not dissenting voices are participating in these communities, hiding behind an anonymous handle, these dissenting voices are not perceived to exist in the online space. Since the space is an ideologically closed community, dissenting voices continue to be marginalized. This marginalization is especially apparent when online space is highly gendered. Women are relegated to certain areas of a forum community or perceived not to exist at all when talking about "real" Islamic issues like *fiqh*. Online communities simply recreate exclusionary, misogynist discourses that limit the ability of women to enter public discussion.

Even outside closed forum communities, commentators can couch their speech in a specific, marked ideology. The microblogging platform Twitter is perhaps the most politically open space on the Internet. However, al-Shabaab affiliates and their allies in the Somali diaspora and wider international Jihadist movements can still for a community based off of language norms.

Nothing said previously should be interpreted to contradict the research done by New Social Movement theorists or Public Sphere advocates like Anderson and Eickelman. Instead, following Mouffe, I argue we should maintain a healthy skepticism of the idea that any public space can be truly "open," free from coercion and dominant

power relationships. This work is simply a call to research into how the Internet has also allowed the same problematic aspects of the physical Public Sphere to manifest online.

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