This paper explores the diffusion of the use of new media technologies by women through the internal and external communicative practices of social movements and the effects upon women’s roles as collective agents of social change. We examine women’s media activism and their roles in the region’s social upheavals, with a focus on four cases: Iran’s Green Protests and its feminist movement; the 2011 political revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, and women’s campaigns since then; and the gradualist movement in Morocco for women’s rights and democratization. We show that women’s cyberactivism, their citizen journalism, and their self-organization both contribute to and reflect the social and political changes that have occurred in the region.

Since 2009, as protesters in Iran, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Bahrain, Yemen, Libya, and Syria poured into the streets to express dissatisfaction with their governments, the international community has been able to glimpse into their world via bloggers and citizen journalists whose video clips taken by their mobile phones and transported into web 2.0 sites have become a source of news. In fact, the trend began earlier, when Salam Pax, the “Baghdad Blogger”, became the iconic citizen blogger and the UK’s Guardian newspaper carried his reports from Iraq during the conflict (Pax, 2003). Since then, access to the web has expanded in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA), especially among the youth. Protesters, bloggers, and citizen journalists include many young women as well as men.
Women in MENA have long taken part in social movements, political protests, and revolutions, even though they have not always benefited – in terms of their legal status and social positions afterwards – from that participation. In the wake of the Arab Spring, interest has been directed at the role that MENA women’s movements and their social networks are playing in the ongoing democratic transitions. For some observers, the sight of thousands of women among the protesters in Iran in June 2009 and in Tunisia and Egypt in early 2011 was a novelty; for others, the extensive deployment of the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) in those mobilizations and by women’s rights activists suggests a new phase in feminist strategic action. For the past decade at least, MENA women activists have used the Internet, social networking sites, and satellite TV to spread their message, recruit supporters, and draw international attention to their cause. In many cases they have used ICTs to circumvent state media control and censorship and connect with others domestically and transnationally. In so doing, the women’s rights activists have become media activists and have joined the ranks of citizen journalists.

Social movements and their relationship with ICTs have long been the topic of research for sociologists. The use of social movements theorizing in the context of Middle East studies is fairly new, and even more so with respect to women’s movements and the role of women in pro-democracy movements. Indeed, two key features of the mass social protests of 2009 and 2011 are (a) the strong presence of ICTs including mobile phone technologies and satellite TV broadcast in countries where print media, TV and radio are strictly controlled by the states; and (b) the presence of women either as feminists or as among those protesting the status quo. The latter in particular may signal a change in MENA politics: women’s movements and broader social movements for social change seem no longer to be separate entities but rather are intertwined social phenomenon.

In what follows, we explore this complex relationship by examining the diffusion of the use of new media technologies by women through the internal and external communicative practices of social movements and the effects upon women’s roles as collective agents of social change. We examine women’s media activism and their roles in the region’s social upheavals, with a focus on four cases:
WOMEN, SOCIAL PROTESTS, AND THE NEW MEDIA ACTIVISM... 3

Iran’s Green Protests and its feminist movement; the 2011 political revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, and women’s campaigns since then; and the gradualist movement in Morocco for women’s rights and democratization. The paper will show that women’s cyberactivism, their citizen journalism, and their self-organization both contribute to and reflect the social and political changes that have occurred in the region.

The paper draws on the literature on women’s movements and campaigns (Skalli, 2010, 2011), the literature on social media activism (Yahyanejad and Gheytanchi, 2012), our active “webservations” (Varisco, 2002) and our ongoing observations of the pro-democracy movements in the region.

Social Movements/Women’s Movements

Social movements are analyzed through certain concepts and tools of analysis that define their scope, strategies and focus. Borrowed from the vast literature on social movements in the U.S. and Europe are concepts such as resource mobilization (McCarthy et al. 1987; Tilly 1978), political process and opportunity (Gamson and Meyer, 1996; Kriesi et al., 1995; McAdam, 1982; Rucht, 1996; Tarrow, 1998), and new social movements (Melucci, 1989; Touraine, 1981). In the context of the Middle East, a growing literature has examined Islamist movements (Wictorowitz, 2003; Wickham, 2004; Schwedler, 2006), women’s movements (Abdulhadi, 1998; Moghadam and Gheytanchi, 2010), and protest movements such as Iran’s 2009 Green Protests (Hashemi and Postel, 2011) and, more recently, the Arab Spring (Tchaicha and Khedija, 2011; Beinen and Vairel, 2011).

Research from within Middle East Studies and Middle East Women’s Studies has elucidated aspects of women’s movements in the modern era in countries such as Egypt, Iran, and Turkey, and their encounters with the state (Karam, 1998; Badran, 1995; Brand, 1998; Al-Ali, 2000; Arat, 1999; Charrad, 2001). Movements for women’s rights were typically led by elite women, and these movements often joined coalitions of nationalist, anti-colonial, or progressive movements. During state-building or modernization periods, some women’s organizations were co-opted by the state, with the effect that by the end of the 20th century, large and relatively well-funded state-affiliated women’s organizations were present throughout the region. Independent women’s organizations
remained small and under-resourced, but the global diffusion of the model of non-governmental organizations saw the expansion of women’s NGOs in MENA. Such organizations included service-delivery NGOs that received funding from governments or international donors; women-led research and policy institutes, including a variety of women-staffed professional associations; and autonomous feminist organizations. The collective action repertoire of the various women’s organizations – whether state-affiliated or autonomous – generally consisted of policy-oriented research, meetings and conferences, some organizing and service delivery (including legal literacy and women’s elderly housing), international networking, and public advocacy and aware-raising, often through radio, television, and the popular press. Most women’s organizations were structured in a traditional manner, with a hierarchy and centralized decision-making. Exceptions were some of the smaller feminist organizations.

One distinctive feature of the past decade has been a burgeoning of women’s rightsself-organizing that is neither centralized nor hierarchical. The model of loose networks that are decentralized and relatively leader-less has permeated the women’s movement and has been characteristic also of the mass social movements in the region, such as the Green Protests and the Arab Spring protests. Women’s activism has thus shifted into loose social networks of advocates of women’s equality, participation, and rights in their respective countries. The shift has been made possible by at least three factors: (1) the diffusion of concepts of democratic organizing and decision-making; (2) the need to “bypass the state” in an authoritarian context; and (3) the spread of ICTs in the globe.

Particularly important in authoritarian societies where states control the mass media is the role of ICTs. The free flow of information and communication is an essential source of power that enables political contests to take place over the aspirations, values, and imaginations of people (Castells, 2007; Mann, 1986). In the case of MENA societies, the free flow of communication afforded by ICTs allows activists to plan ahead, communicate with the outside world, and circumvent state censorship and control. For example, in Syria, activists engaged with the National Campaign against Honor Crimes collected signatures of thousands of citizens on a petition that was sent to the president, parliament, government and media in 2009
In March 2011, only 19.8% of Syrians had access to the internet (http://www.internetworldstats.com/middle.htm) but the digital activists, women included, have employed new media to wage a variety of campaigns mobilizing Syrians against what they see as repressive state policies. During 2011 and 2012, evidence of police and military brutality was globally disseminated by Syrian citizen journalists.

This process of greater citizen participation is not a new phenomenon but has been occurring for some time, in three different forms. In one, citizens create or join non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and advocacy networks, helping to strengthen civil society. Women’s groups, in particular, have formed women’s rights organizations throughout the region, demanding family law reform and other changes to women’s legal status. Another form of citizen participation has been overt manifestations of public dissatisfaction. In the 1980s, street protests erupted in North Africa over structural adjustment policies; in the late 1990s, Iran’s student movement pushed for political and social reforms; and in the new century, Egypt saw a wave of protests by workers, by supporters of Palestinian national rights, and by political reformists. A third form is what Asef Bayathas termed “social non-movements”, by which he means “societal, incremental, invisible yet pivotal change precipitated by ordinary people who are not civil society activists” (Bayat, 2010: 21). Earlier, Diane Singerman (1996) had examined how low-income Cairenes use family and community ties to secure a livelihood and carry on cultural traditions, which she termed a form of political practice.

In this paper, we focus on the first two forms of citizen participation, and especially the use of the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) for purposes of mobilization, protest, or political change. The power of communication in spite of state censorship, and indeed the spread and use of ICTs in MENA contributes to civic activism and a greater sensitivity to deprivations and citizen rights through the diffusion of grievances and aspirations. The new social networking media act as both framing devices and mobilizing mechanisms providing certain degree anonymity but also limited effect. As Yahyanejad and Gheytanchi (2012: 151) state, with reference to Iran’s Green movement: “Though social media can widen the grassroots base of social movements,
such media (with their open, horizontal nature) can also breed confusion when there is a need to deal with complex issues and tactics that require discipline, strategy, and a degree of central leadership.” The open and horizontal nature of social media allows previously marginalized groups such as youth, women and ethnic minorities to participate in the early stages of social protest in MENA.¹

Along with the Internet, the introduction of satellite TVs in MENA has opened up the possibility for marginalized groups to be connected to their peers elsewhere in the world and outside of state limits. In the new century, the combination of political liberalization and diffusion of satellite TV and Internet technology in MENA led to a relatively open, transnational, and electronic communicative space that some scholars called a “new Arab public sphere” (Ayish, 2002; Eickelman and Anderson, 1999; Hafez, 2001; Lynch, 2006; Rugh, 2004). As Marlyn Tadros stated, the Internet and ICTs had contributed to a “distinct community within Arab world – a community of online activists, able to communicate with each other and capable of producing their own two way information without direct government intervention. It may even be called a parallel community of activists, strengthened by the fact that individuals who normally would not be involved in activism are now ‘speaking out’ and expressing themselves on the Internet” (Tadros, 2005: 24). Describing women’s activism, Tadros argued that while their websites might be outnumbered by those of Islamists, their “virtual activism” was an irreversible social trend.

For women’s rights activists in MENA, the Internet allows connectivity and mobilization to an unprecedented degree, and has helped to contribute to a certain “feminization of the public sphere” (Moghadam and Sadiqi, 2006) through on-line and off-line discussions, debates, and commentaries on women’s rights, state policies, or the impact of socio-political changes on women.² In addition to the typical forms of women’s organizing such as discussion groups, conferences, and publications, women’s rights advocates have added street protests, boycotts, petition drives and other non-violent strategies to their collective action repertoire. Indeed, women have been at the forefront of non-violent political action (Stephan 2010), and their involvement in the MENA social protests is deeply intertwined with the larger social movement for socio-political change in these countries.
Some examples of the strategies deployed, and the way that they widen the network of both women’s rights activists and social activists, illustrate our point. In most countries, women’s rights activists have turned to satellite TV such as al-Jazeera, al-Arabiyya, CNN International, and the BBC to help counter the state’s monopoly over the news. Whereas activists might once have been concerned about being labeled “Western puppets” or discredited as having been “manipulated by the agenda of foreign satellite TV”, as one Iranian feminist put it (interview with an activist in Iran in 2009), they have increasingly used satellite TV to advance their cause. Nisbet and Myers (2010: 362) alert us that these satellite TV stations are contributing to the making of “transnational collective interests” across the region. Satellite TV provides the most appropriate context to the emergence of collective interests of women across the region.\(^3\)

In another example, in the wake of the expulsion of foreign reporters from Iran after the first week of the Green Protests, it was nearly impossible for the international community to acquire evidence of the state’s suppression of the protests. In response, women’s rights activists uploaded video clips of state brutality against activists on YouTube, a move that changed the nature of the news. A third example is the use of maternalist discourses among women protesters. In Egypt, women activists brought their children to the street protest of January 2011, and in their blogs they demanded a better future for their children. Such expressions of “activist mothering”, in physical space as well as on blogs, Facebook, YouTube, and other social networking sites resonated with many women surfing the net, with the effect of creating what we call “accidental” activists or feminists.

Indeed, our ongoing research on women and social media in Iran has found that many women initially go on-line to connect with peers and then stumble across social issues discussed widely in the Persian cyberspace and social networking sites. This seems also to have occurred in Morocco, in connection with the tragic case of Amina Filali. The young woman’s suicide following an abusive marriage to her rapist galvanized numerous Moroccans to protest on-line and in front of state offices the oppression and injustices experienced by such poor women (Skalli, 2012). In Iran, Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt, the new communication technologies and women’s increasing access to the Internet have familiarized a broad
cross-section of the population with critiques of women’s oppression and campaigns to end it. The strategic use of the Internet by activists for purposes of information dissemination, and widespread connectivity among young people, has thus created “accidental” feminists and activists.

Why people rebel is a complex and variable combination of grievances, opportunities, and what McAdam called “biographical availability”. For many citizens in MENA, the adoption of economic policies of neoliberalism – which are associated with growing income inequalities, corruption, unemployment, and the rising costs of living – has been the source of widespread grievances. For some segments of the population, rising educational attainment of women as well as men, the high rate of youth unemployment, and access to world society and global norms through satellite television, social networking media, and travel have generated aspirations for more freedoms as well as dissatisfaction with the status quo. This is the broad economic, socio-political and demographic context in which protests have occurred in Iran, Tunisia, Egypt, and Morocco, to which we now turn.

**Case Studies: Iran, Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco**

The June 2009 presidential election in Iran was controversial and contentious, pitting two reformist candidates against the incumbent, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. What began as a protest framed as “Where is my Vote?” became a more direct challenge to the authority of the state, including that of the unelected Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei (Hashemi and Postel, 2011). The Green movement that emerged out of the mass protests, like the women’s rights movement, was decentralized, non-hierarchal, and grassroots in nature.

Following the contested election results, the government of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad clamped down on protesters, who then turned to Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook; citizen journalism in Iran helped make the Green protests known worldwide. Ahmadinejad shut down the Internet in Iran for some 20 hours but even after the ban was lifted, the government continued to heavily filter the Internet, blocking sites such as Facebook and BBC news. It implemented a centralized system for internet filtering to augment the filtering conducted at the Internet service provider (ISP) level (Diebert *et al.*, 2010: 545). In response, Iranian activists used whatever
means they could to get their message out, including mobile phones (with SIM cards that allow a limited level of privacy). People in other countries began setting up their computers as proxies so that citizens could access the Internet through those other computers, circumventing the security set up by the Iranian government. The cyber-based hacking group Anonymous began a website called Anonymous Iran that provided tools to get around Iran’s security measures. Citizens themselves began using the newly popular Twitter to post blurbs about the protests and the unjustness of the election, and also used photo sites such as Flickr and Tehran 24, as well as YouTube and Facebook to post images about protests and violence against protesters. The Green protest movement was repressed when the state put the presidential challengers under house arrest, a sniper killed a woman protest participant, and hundreds were arrested and jailed.

Meanwhile, women’s rights groups continued to maintain the on-line Feminist School (Madreseh-e-Feministi), which had grown out of the One Million Signatures Campaign launched in 2007. The strong on-line presence of the Feminist School helped to produce “accidental activists” while also serving as a communication, recruiting, and coordinating tool within Iran and across the world. Not only in Tehran, but in the provinces, too, women’s rights activists used social networking sites to stay in touch with their counterparts across the country. Due to the Campaign’s minimalist list of demands, activists were not exclusively feminist but were also social activists, including a number of young men, demanding changes in law and social equality for all.

Our interviews with several accidental feminists and activists in Iran indicate that their encounter with social and women’s rights issues within the cyberspace provided them with a safe environment to explore new venues and express their feelings of frustration with the status quo. Some of these activists come from the families of high-ranking officials who find cyberspace safe to express solidarity with women’s rights activists. It should be noted that Iran’s “virtual public sphere” expanded considerably in the new century. Professional reporters who found themselves unemployed after the state shut down of reformist newspapers began writing blogs in Iran, and this helped instigate cyberactivism in the country. For women activists of the One Million Signature Campaign and the Stop Stoning
Campaign, cyberactivism and the virtual public spheremade it possible for them to “bypass the state” and make transnational ties, in part through the bridging actions of the vast Iranian diaspora community (Tohidi, 2010: 405; Moghadam and Gheytanchi, 2010). By the end of the new century’s first decade, many Iranians, notably youth and women, had been recruited to the cause of women’s rights and political change in Iran. Within the Iranian diaspora community in particular, the issues of women’s rights and political change have become more integrated than before.

The repression of the Green Protests forced many dissidents into exile, including a number of the New Religious Intellectuals, free-thinking university professors, and feminist activists. The government considered cyberactivists “puppets of the U.S.” who seek to carry out a “soft revolution” in Iran, and thus arrested and imprisoned many bloggers and women’s rights activists. Feminist activists who challenged women’s inequality in family laws and in the Islamic Constitution were deemed a “threat to national security”; many were harassed or arrested; others forced into exile. At the time of this writing, the Iranian government had started a new wave of arrests of bloggers, women’s rights activists and programmers (Farivar, 2012). Despite state pressure, Iranian women’s rights activists have remained active and eager to exchange information with their counterparts in the Arab world and elsewhere.\footnote{Turning to Tunisia, citizens grappled with authoritarianism, with occasional manifestations of opposition by the leading trade union, the UGTT, feminist associations, and human rights groups. Research shows that organizational resources may counterbalance the dampening effects of a closed political context, and Tunisia’s civil society grew across the decades. For example, since the late 1980s, women’s groups have decried fundamentalism and called for women’s equality and since 1999, the Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates and the Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche et de Développement (AFTURD) have militated for gender equality in matters of inheritance. In addition to helping form the Collectif 95 Maghreb-Egalité, Tunisian women’s groups have worked together and with other civil society associations on matters such as human rights, social welfare, and fair elections. Social and economic development, a well-organized social provisioning system, and friendly ties with Europe as well as the Arab world and Africa.
ensured stability (Ben Romdhane, 2006). But the economic crisis took its toll on employment and the cost of living, while the 2010 WikiLeaks revelations of the corruption and self-enrichment of the president’s wife’s family enraged Tunisians. When a street vendor ordered to stop his trade resorted to self-immolation in December 2010 after being denied justice, his act seemed to symbolize a national protest against the collective loss of dignity. The tragedy triggered massive street protests the following January with slogans such as “Ben Ali, d’égage” ([President] Ben Ali, Leave) and “l’emploi, notredroit” (employment is our right). Leftists, secularists, feminists, trade unionists, and supporters of the long-banned Islamic movement all took to the streets, while young people kept up the momentum through social networking media.

Meanwhile, the Internet had generally opened up space for Tunisian dissidents through blogs, discussion forums, and music. The Tunisian blog aggregator site http://www.nawaat.org was created in 2004 highlighting the work of high profile bloggers and connecting the bloggers’ community. Contrary to Iran, where the tech savvy activists are barred from creating open software to enhance communications, the Arab world has embraced the phenomenon. Al Jazeera was the first professional news organization to launch a Creative Commons repository in 2008 and in 2009 the station hosted the first Creative Commons Arab Meeting. Tech, Free/Open Software and Creative Commons events have contributed to building a regional community. Since 2008 Arab Techies Meetings have been held in Cairo, with a girls’ subgroup, Arab Women Techies, holding the first meeting in 2010 in Beirut. Many bloggers and tech community members supported the organization of “Nhar 3ala 3ammar,” a rally against online censorship on May 22, 2010. In 2011, the street demonstrations were captured on cell phone cameras and then uploaded as videos on known opposition sites and blogs, such as atunisiangirl.blogspot.com (created by blogger Lina Ben Mhenni), nawaat.org, and les Révolutionaires de la dignité, whose contents served as news feeds for satellite networks like al-Jazeera.

Larbi Sadiki, writing in Al Jazeera on-line, notes that in the October 2011 elections, Ennahda may have won, but it did so in a context whereby three million eligible citizens did not register to vote, and of the four million who did register, few voted, giving an-Nahda a plurality (40% of votes cast) rather than a sweeping majority of the
Sadiki argues that coalition-building and partnership is needed in such a context. In fact, an-Nahda wisely did so, by offering prominent posts to leaders of secular and leftist political parties and thus creating a coalition government. This bodes well for Tunisia’s democratic transition, despite the emergence of troublesome salafist groups. Women’s rights groups have remained mobilized, insisting that there be no changes to the country’s fairly egalitarian family law, which, they point out, reflect the prevailing reality of family relations, and that women’s presence in political bodies be increased (Tchaichi and Arfaoui, 2011).

Our third case study is Egypt. By the turn of the new century, Hosni Mubarak’s presidency had come to be equated with cronyism, rigged elections, and repression of any and all dissidence. The government’s crackdown on the Islamist terrorism of the 1990s was perhaps appreciated by many, but sweeping or arbitrary arrests were not. Neoliberal economic reforms deepened dissatisfaction. Indeed, between 2004 and 2010, nearly two million workers voiced grievances through strikes, sit-ins and other forms of protest against poor living conditions caused by the erosion of wages, rising inflation, and precarious employment (Beinin, 2010). At the same time, Egypt’s virtual public sphere and cyberactivism were expanding. In 2005, prominent blogger Alaa Abdel Fattah introduced the concept of citizen journalism in 2005. A few weeks after the sexual harassment of women who were protesting at the Journalists Syndicate in Cairo, Fattah posted a blog entry: “Towards popular journalism” (Manalaa.net), and later printed it as a pamphlet, distributing it during street demonstrations. Talk show hosts at satellite TV stations discussed it live. His post was read widely and his ideas were taken seriously by activists and specially women and youth who had previously found themselves on the margins of opposition politics in Egypt. In 2008, the Egyptian “Facebook girl” Israa Abdel Rattah, a young woman in her twenties, used the new social medium to organize a campaign of civil disobedience to protest the deteriorating conditions of the average citizen. On the morning of a general strike by workers scheduled to take place on April 6th, 2008, she was arrested and detained for 18 days. The violent suppression of the workers’ strike resulted in the formation of the 6th of April Youth Movement. Some Egyptian bloggers wrote of their empowering experiences participating in the on-line strike of April
6, 2009, which was organized on Facebook, and asked people to stay in their homes for a day to demonstrate solidarity with striking textile workers in the Delta (Beinen and Vairel, 2011: 249).

Meanwhile, the issue of sexual harassment of women had become a matter of national discussion, mainly as a result of awareness-raising by the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights (ECWR). A 2008 survey was picked up by the BBC World Service, while the ECRW itself had a global distribution list in which it disseminated its press releases. In addition to calling for the prosecution of men accused of sexually harassing women on the streets or at workplaces, the ECRW called for more integration of women in the political process.

On January 18th, 2011, and in the aftermath of the Tunisian protests, the young woman Asma Mahfouz uploaded a short video to YouTube and Facebook in which she announced, “Whoever says women shouldn’t go to the protests because they will get beaten, let him have some honor and manhood and come with me on January 25.” The same day, WaelGhonim created a Facebook page in honor of Khaled Said, a young Egyptian blogger who had been killed by police in Alexandria. The Mahfouz video went viral, countless Egyptians learned about Khaled Said, and the planned one-day demonstration became a popular revolution. The diffusion of the Tunisian protests encouraged and indeed emboldened Egyptian activists to issue demands: increasing the minimum wage, combating poverty and unemployment, ending the state of emergency, and removing the Minister of the Interior. Soon it became a single demand: the departure of longtime president Hosni Mubarak. The temporary Internet shutdown that marked the first week of revolt highlighted the significance of new and alternative media.

One useful tool to Egyptian protesters was “Speak to tweet”. This tool created through collaboration of Google and Twitter allowed Egyptians to leave voice recordings by calling an international phone number. The recordings were automatically transcribed and posted as messages on twitter, and the tweets were then picked up by a separate group of volunteers and translated into various languages on a website called “Alive in Egypt.” Camera cell phones, social media, opposition blogs, chat rooms, and al-Jazeera’s “continuous coverage” and advocacy journalism all served to form a feedback information loop, keeping the story alive,
transmitting it to other Arab countries and to Western publics (Eltantawy and Wiest, 2011: 1216).

The massive participation of women in the Tahrir Square rallies and protests was a sign of their opposition to the Mubarak regime and their dissatisfaction with their social and political exclusion. But it was also evidence of their on-line and off-line citizen participation. Increasing access to the Internet and familiarity with social media networking allowed them to blog, make appeals to national and international publics, and film and post the street demonstrations. According to MacKinnon (2004: 6): “Interactive participatory media transforms a one-way conversation between media and ‘audience’ into a conversation with an information community. While information flows through traditional media in a linear fashion, information flows through online participatory media in a multidirectional, self-replicating viral fashion.” Women who participated in this information community experienced trust and two-way communication with other members of the community. This experience was empowering for many Egyptian women who had never before participated in a community with equal access and rights. That feeling, however, was short-lived, as women who came to Tahrir Square to celebrate International Women’s Day on March 8th as well as to call for greater participation and rights for women in the new democratic Egypt, were assaulted by men who found their presence and demands objectionable. In December 2011, women protesters were assaulted by police, and one scene of a young woman being dragged away by police, her top clothing stripped to reveal a blue bra and a policeman seemingly about to stomp on her stomach, immediately went viral, causing waves of outrage across the globe.

We now turn to Morocco, which similarly has been affected by the ICT revolution. It has a very high rate of Internet usage (see Table 1) and women’s groups early on recognized the utility of the new social networking media. Morocco’s 20th February Youth Movement was part of the diffusion of the protests in neighboring Tunisia as well as Egypt, and it compelled King Mohammed VI to agree to constitutional changes and a referendum in July 2011 that would limit his vast powers. But the political reform was also part of a more gradual democratization process that began in 1998 with the formation of a progressive government, and included a 12-year feminist campaign for family law reform that succeeded in 2003.
Morocco’s women’s movement has been a key participant in the country’s democratization process since at least the early 1990s, when it began to agitate for a more egalitarian family law and helped build the country’s nascent civil society.

When the government of Prime Minister Yousef declared its support for the Action Plan for Development and Women’s Rights, which included a section on the reform of the country’s very patriarchal family law, the Moudawana, women’s groups formed an umbrella group called Chabaka (literally, network in Arabic) and allied themselves to the government with the goal of promoting women’s rights, a democratic polity, and national development. Their communications strategy included narratives about the devastating effects of polygamy and unilateral male divorce on women, children, and the family. In the days before the widespread use of social networking media, the strategy of Moroccan women’s rights activists was to build consensus for the Action Plan. They sought to do this through a variety of research, advocacy, and awareness-raising activities including publications, press releases, flyers, and advertisements and articles in the national dailies explaining the discriminatory provisions of legal texts in matters of repudiation, divorce, child support and domestic violence (Sadiqi and Ennaji, 2006; Skalli, 2007; Moghadam and Gheytanchi, 2010).

Their allies in government instituted a series of “social dialogues” to promote the Plan, and women’s groups also took to the streets in support of the Plan and of women’s rights. Huge rallies for and against the Plan and family law reform took place in March 2000. In the face of sustained hostility from Islamist forces, the government felt compelled to withdraw the Plan. The women’s organizations pressed ahead, with a shift in strategy and framing. In a country overwhelmingly Muslim and pious, women’s groups formulated arguments rooted in an egalitarian interpretation of Islam, thus exercising *ijtihad* (reinterpretation of Sharia-based jurisprudence to accommodate new conditions). Other frames were the imperatives of social development and poverty alleviation in Morocco, and the rights of women and children. The family law reform was rightly lauded as a landmark event.

Moroccan women have continued to mobilize for women’s rights, on-line and off-line, and they have also helped to raise awareness about the gender aspects of the democratic transitions in
the region. In 2004, a national network of 17 Moroccan women’s organizations and centers for battered women launched the website Anaruz (www.anaruz.org) to promote women’s freedom from violence as “a right and not a privilege” (Skalli, 2010). In May 2011, the Association Démocratique des Femmes du Maroc (ADFM), in collaboration with a number of international partners, organized a seminar in Rabat regional seminar on Women and Democratic Transitions in the MENA region. The seminar was publicized online and diffused globally by its U.S.-based partner, the Women’s Learning Partnership for Rights, Development, and Peace.8

All this suggests the important role of new media activism for social change, giving voice to a new dissident public, including individual women and feminist groups. It redefines the terms of civic engagement, protest, and the public sphere, and illustrates the efficacy of transnational cyberactivism. The growth of Internet use in Egypt, Iran, Morocco and Tunisia illustrates the capacity of citizens to circumvent state censorship. While traditional civil society groups such as Tunisia’s General Labor Union (UGTT) and Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood offered experience with logistics for the social movements and protest groups, the participatory environment of the web 2.0 allowed marginalized groups such as women to equally participate in the making of powerful social protests.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Total population</th>
<th>Capital City Population</th>
<th>Internet Usage (as % of total population)</th>
<th>Facebook Usage (% penetration rate)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>77,891,220</td>
<td>8,429,807</td>
<td>46.9%</td>
<td>Not Available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>82,079,636</td>
<td>7,947,121</td>
<td>26.4%</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>31,968,361</td>
<td>1,754,425</td>
<td>49.0%</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>10,629,186</td>
<td>739,436</td>
<td>36.3%</td>
<td>26.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Discussion: ICTs and the networked society

Two views of the Internet may be identified: the optimistic and the pessimistic perspectives. Manuel Castells, one of the first theorists of ICTs, coined the term “network society” to denote societies
empowered by the internet and other communication technologies. Larry Diamond (2010) uses the term “liberation technology” to highlight the power of the internet and communication technologies for social activists in the authoritarian regimes. Since the early days of the Internet, the optimists have theorized the liberating power of ICTs. According to Deibert and Rohozinski (2010: 43): “No other mode of communication in human history has facilitated the democratization of communication to the same degree.” The pessimist view on the ICTs has shed light on the fact that just as the activists can use the new technologies for their own purposes, so do authoritarian states use ICTs to exert pressure on the activists and censor dissent. Rebecca McKinnon, for instance, has termed the Chinese government’s use of ICTs to censor and suppress dissent “networked authoritarianism” (2010). While authoritarian states do exert censorship on the Internet and new communication technologies, the human rights activists and especially women’s rights activists find new and innovative ways to circumvent state censorship and widen their base inside and outside their respective countries.9

Some theorists have questioned the dichotomous relationship between state censorship and social activism via Information and communication technologies. Deibert and Rohozinski (2010: 45) defy the dichotomy between liberation and control by stating the following:

Cyberspace is a domain of intense competition, one that creates an ever changing matrix of opportunities and constraints for social forces and ideas. These social forces and ideas, in turn, are imbued with alternative rationalities that collide with one another and affect the structure of the communications environment. Unless the characteristics of cyberspace change radically in the near future and global culture become monolithic, linking technological properties to a single social outcome such as liberation or control is a highly dubious exercise.

In our paper we have acknowledged both the opportunities and the risks of cyberactivism. The state does police the Internet, and activists who cross certain “red lines” may be harassed, arrested, charged with sedition, or forced to shut down their site. This has occurred in Iran, but even in democratic countries such as the U.S., dissident journalism can face serious charges – as occurred with WikiLeaks in the aftermath of the release of classified U.S. diplomatic cables in 2010-11.
At the same time, cyberspace does create an opportunity structure for activists within and across borders. For example, the anonymity that it permits has enabled the diffusion of women’s rights issues within a national public sphere and across transnational social space. The Internet thus becomes an indispensable tool for women struggling for change within authoritarian or patriarchal contexts. What is more, the presence of so many female bloggers is itself a sign of women’s growing assertion, self-organizing, or changing gender roles. Women’s access to the new ICTs in MENA and their contributions to the virtual public sphere may help to transform attitudes toward women’s participation and rights. Ethnographic studies of women’s use of the Internet and mobile technology in Jordan, Egypt and Kuwait shows that an incremental social change regarding gender roles is underway. As Deborah Wheeler (2007: 100) has noted: “the Internet, if it does empower, does so through the small windows of opportunity created by the technology and its users as they work in tandem or isolation to subvert norms and social orders.” We have provided but a few examples: Iran’s One Million Signatures Campaign and the Feminist School; the Moroccan campaign for family law reform and the recent outburst over the tragic death of AminaFilali; Egypt’s women’s rights campaign against sexual harassment campaign and protests against post-revolutionary exclusion of women; and Tunisian feminists’ insistence on maintaining a presence in governance. In all these cases, women’s rights activists tied their claims to wider social and political demands for democratization, participation, and rights.

In his comprehensive study of Muslim communities, Howard (2010:10) found out that “new information technologies have contributed to democratic entrenchment or transition in countries with large Muslim communities.” One of the ways in which democratization is linked to ICTs is the widespread use of blogs. Men and women are able to freely express their political viewpoints in blogs leading to unprecedented inclusive and dynamic public discussions of previously taboo subjects such as women’s rights. Among the bloggers are women in disguise who are writing with pseudonyms, interested individuals and state officials who have found a safe haven in the blogsphere for expressing their views independent of state policy.
The widening of the virtual public sphere allowing for more discussions on gender roles and criticism of restrictive state policies regarding gender roles is further made possible by circumvention tools. In MENA, people are viewing websites despite state censorship via circumvention tools, Virtual Privacy Networks (VPNs) and alternative routing. Some of these projects, in the Arab countries, are funded partly by the U.S. State Department: “Internet in a suitcase” http://andrewsullivan.thedailybeast.com/2011/06/internet-in-a-suitcase.html and various other U.S.-based initiatives (Salime, 2010). While activists are not necessarily the ones developing the circumvention tools, they are the primary beneficiary group. Highlighting the impact of “computer mediated communication” (CMC) on social movements, Diani (2000: 387) writes: “The potential to build ‘virtual [social movement] communities’ seems highest among sympathizers of movement organizations who act professionally on behalf of causes with vast resonance among the public opinion and low radical potential.” The Internet allows activists to connect with each other as well as with sympathizers outside of their country.

The explosion of blog posts by women in MENA has implications for two important aspects of social movement theorizing. In terms of framing, women as citizen journalists change the framing of social and political protest. They make protest sound and look more democratic, more inclusive and non-violent; and they insert issues of women’s participation and rights into the discourse. With respect to political opportunity, women bloggers and citizen journalists are able to use political openings or closures to their advantage through ICTs, thus constructing and constituting their own political opportunity structure. The domestic links or transnational ties that are created may occur informally as interested individuals discuss women’s rights and what is happening in their countries with regard to women’s rights and daily struggles. As Goldfarb (2006: 141) observes: “The Internet favors a democratic politics of small things.” Although the digital divide along the lines of gender roles still exists in the Arab world, opportunities are increasing for women to become active in local social movements (Huyer and Sikosha, 2003). The Arab uprisings of 2011-12 showed that many women had been waiting for an opportunity to demonstrate their discontent with the status quo as they had become ever more informed about women’s
disadvantages in their countries. As young people in MENA are now more connected with each other through online narratives that were previously censored by the states (Peterson, 2011), young women are increasingly engaged in public debates about their rights.

In the wake of the Arab Spring, there is more public recognition of women’s roles in the uprisings and demands for more participation and representation by women. For example, Lebanese feminists called for a march to call attention to the role of women in the Arab spring. The decision to hold the World Social Forum in Tunis in March 2013 provides an additional opportunity for women across the region, and with partners across the globe, to coordinate activities and organize workshops and dialogues on women’s rights. The introduction of ICTs in MENA has opened up the public sphere and offered new opportunities for social movements in general and women’s movements in particular, along with opportunities for coalitions and collaborations across movements.

Conclusions

Nisbet and Myers (2009: 8) assert that “transnational media may promote alternative collective political identities at the expense of nation-state centric identities.” While national identities are arguably not superseded, one complementary source of identity is certainly feminist, or women’s rights activist. This is especially significant given that authoritarian states and Islamist movements alike have viewed feminism as a Western phenomenon, culturally alien and an imported ideology. By claiming the virtual public sphere, actively participating in street protests, or asserting themselves as women’s rights activists, MENA women have been changing the nature of social movements and of public discourses.

We conclude with three propositions. First, women’s struggles for civil, political, and social rights are now part of the series of factors that led to the mass social upheavals in MENA. It is therefore no longer adequate to treat women’s activism as an isolated phenomenon. Second, women as citizen journalists have been changing the way that issues are framed as well as helping to alter the political opportunity structure. Women’s presence has historically signaled “non-violent” movements that aim to bring social change through peaceful means, while their non-hierarchical associations and networks have made it easier to forge coalitions.
Third, by becoming citizen journalists and writing about social and political protest, women become media activists and undercut the communication power and control of the state. It remains to be seen, however, if the domestic links and coalitions within which women activists participate are able to undermine existing patriarchal structures and bring about the more open, democratic, and egalitarian societies to which the region’s feminists have long aspired.

Notes

1. We should point out that the population that has direct access to the Internet is a minority in some countries in MENA, but as Howard and Hussein (2012: 122) point out in the case of Egypt and Tunisia, “this minority is a strategic one, typically comprising an elite made up of educated professionals, young entrepreneurs, urban dwellers, and government workers.” Elsewhere in MENA, a large proportion – 35% - 45% — are using the Internet and social networking sites, and many subscribers share Internet access with families and friends.

2. There are numerous websites, social networking sites, blogs, and tweets on the topic of women’s voices in the new Middle East. One example is this popular Facebook page entitled “The Uprising of Women in the Arab World”: http://www.facebook.com/intifadat.almar2a

3. New ICTs, of course, do not replace the old mass media such as TV and radio. A survey of media habits and trust among the general Iranian public was conducted by the U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors in collaboration with Gallup, and the Iran Media Program at the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School of Communications. When asked to select their three most important news sources from a list provided, TV was the first choice for 96% of the sample, followed by the press (45%), and friend and family (38%). See http://iranmediaresearch.org/en/research/pdffile/990


5. See the following new site in Persian that aims to allow women to exchange their experiences regarding activism in Iran and the Arab world: http://www.bridgesforwomen.org/; for a report of March 8th in 2012 (International Women’s Day) celebration in Tehran by women’s rights activists see this link: http://www.ir-women.org/spip.php?article9989


7. See, for example, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7514567.stm. See also http://www.ecwronline.org/english/index.html


References


Kawakibi, Salam, (2010). Internet or Enter- Not: The Syrian Experience, Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia, working paper series-no 10, Hivos, University of Amsterdam.


**Websites**

The Uprising of Women in the Arab World: [http://www.facebook.com/intifadat.almar2a](http://www.facebook.com/intifadat.almar2a)

Women’s Learning Partnership: [www.learningpartnership.org](http://www.learningpartnership.org)

Iran: [http://www.we-change.org/english/](http://www.we-change.org/english/); [www.sign4change.info](http://www.sign4change.info); [www.feministschool.org](http://www.feministschool.org)

Morocco: [www.adfm.ma](http://www.adfm.ma); [www.femmesdumaroc.com](http://www.femmesdumaroc.com)

Egypt: [www.Manalaa.net](http://www.Manalaa.net); [http://www.facebook.com/elshaheeed.co.uk](http://www.facebook.com/elshaheeed.co.uk)