

Minorities Revisited: Demarginalizing the “Others” in the Digital Era

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Résumé

Pendant les soulèvements arabes, les médias sociaux ont constitué une menace pour la souveraineté et ont conduit à la chute de régimes autoritaires qui englobaient toutes les formes de régimes non démocratique. Compte tenu de toutes les menaces politiques posées, le net est apparu comme un nouvel outil de gouvernance mondiale. Il a été reconnu comme une puissante zone de liberté d'expression qui modifie le paysage politique. En particulier, les réseaux sociaux ouvrent de nouveaux domaines de communication pour les moins favorisés qui luttent depuis longtemps avec leur marginalité. Pour cette raison, les minorités ont quitté leur réalité sociale physique et ont façonné un nouvel espace virtuel d'appartenance alternatif au courant domaine.

Sous l'effet de cette tension entre le réel et le virtuel, le présent article met en lumière les expériences des groupes minoritaires dans les médias sociaux au lendemain du printemps arabe. Il explore la manière dont les minorités ont migré vers le monde numérique pour constituer leur espace de liberté d'expression. La perspective culturelle a été utilisée pour expliquer davantage comment les plateformes de médias sociaux peuvent être un outil de libération démocratiques et/ou non démocratique.

Mot clés : *Minorités, médias sociaux, marginalité, liberté d'expression, démocratie*

Abstract

During the Arab uprisings, social media posed a threat to sovereignty and lead to the downfall of authoritarian regimes that encompassed all forms of undemocratic rule. Given all the political threat posed, the net emerged as a new tool of global governance. It has been recognized as a powerful free speech zone that alters the political landscape. Particularly,

social networking opens up new realms of communication for the less advantaged who have long been struggling with their marginality. For this reason, minorities left their physical social reality and shaped a new virtual space of belonging alternative to the mainstream. In the effect of this tension between the real and the virtual, the current paper sheds light on minority groups experiences in social media in the aftermath of the Arab spring. It explores the way minorities migrated to the digital world to constitute their space of free speech. The cultural perspective has been employed to explain further how social media platforms can be a tool for democratic and/or nondemocratic liberation.

Keywords: *Minorities, social media, marginality, free speech, democracy*

Introduction

Social media have emerged as a great force that configure and reconfigure the public agenda setting. In this media framework, the masses are allowed to voice their concerns without restrictions. Notably, social media rearranged the social order, and introduced a new logic that privileges individual patterns over the dominant majority dynamics. According to Hofstede (2001), members of a given culture with high ‘power distance’ are subordinate in front of people making the final decisions about their destinies. In the same manner, minority groups that are subordinate in ‘low power distance’ societies adopt, through forced assimilation, what the leader majority decides for them. Minority social groups in ‘high power distance’ cultures although they are members of the collectivistic community, they are out-group members and they are treated differently. It is important to realize that minorities’ individual choices and preferences, according to Triandis (1995), are more dependent to groups than to their ‘individual self’.

Now, although the leading majority counters minority ideology and ignores its demand for a “minority status” to exercise its free speech, digital media ignite a new hope for disperse minority groups as they enable them to exist in the virtual space in a way that “deterritorializes” the social force which restrain them. When seen in this way social media crosses the divide between minorities and mainstream society to create a new platform for rights negotiation. This paper sheds light on minorities’ quest for freedom and explores further how Moroccan Christians, Shias, the Baha’is and the LGBTQ+ communities have exploited social media to migrate from the real to the virtual in an attempt to seek liberation from any dogmas that can criminalize their freedom of speech, faith and worship.

1. Minorities and Democracy Ideals: From Margin to the Mainstream

In accordance with Hofstede (2001), the Moroccan society as a hierarchical culture includes followers who comply with directives of the leader majority. However, in the case of difference and when minority groups' interests, goals and aspirations go against the norm clash occurs. The individual self finds difficulties to merge with the collective self and feels subordinate to its in-group entity (Triandis, 1995; Dickson et al., 2003). In this pattern, when individuals strive to re-exist in this hierarchical relationship between the individual and the group, Triandis (1995) claims that, democracy retreats and loses ground.

The basis of any democratic state is so-called liberty; however, minority groups as vulnerable people are deprived the right to free speech. Individuals in general always prefer less repression and thus the leader majority tries to maximize its use of power to minimize minority groups' lines of individual freedom. This logic, in fact, might not be accurate when national security is threatened and the state has to step in to protect and secure its citizens from inside and outside threats (Hobbes, 1651). Liberty in this case, becomes more primarily about what individual freedoms a person maintains or surrender with respect to the general peace agreement the ruler and the ruled decide to consider. This critical relationship between the state and individuals simply implies that scales of freedom are optimized based on the conditions that preserve and enhance group security.

Relating to democracy, liberty cannot exist without a democratic will to guarantee citizens' inalienable right to uphold equal freedom. The democratic process adheres to the tenets that come with the so called 'expensive freedom' or 'space' embedded in the prevailing democratic cultures. However, democracy can sometimes be used as a justification for limiting liberties that the majority rule decides not to protect or expand. The values of individual freedom might be undermined under democratic standards that strike a balance between civil rights, civil liberties and political rights. In other words, democracy does not protect rights and freedoms when certain restrictions are imposed within the power of the state to frame the destructive actions of citizens.

2. Equal Recognition and Minority Inclusion

Social integration of any group is related to the social connectedness status a person would choose in order to enforce his in-group cohesion into the system (Esser, 2006). Regardless of the difference or the distance, social media guarantees democratic integration of

all society segments at large. The use of social media would lead in this case to ensuring inclusion of the marginalized groups through the following dimensions: acculturation, interaction, identification, and placement (Peeters & d'Haenens, 2005). Social media can also function as an additional mechanism responsible for empowering the disempowered through web-based generated content that focuses on their communal disturbances manifested through the lens of social media sites. The focus in social integration in this context is to transcend the social and political divide for an elaboration of a more diverse democratic identity existence. Consequently, minorities interaction within the net shared-content places them in a social position where they can gain rights in the online community.

Prior research on minorities has shown that media platform has radically changed the notion of a community. According to Wegner (2006), digital media facilitates the experiences of the minority community as it “creates new ‘community times’ that are unconstrained by schedules and time zones as it creates ‘communal spaces’ that do not depend on physical location” (p. 56). Cormack (2013), to follow on the steps of Wegner, defined communities of practice “as a group of people who share a concern of something.....and move away from the traditional sense of territoriality to organize themselves into communities of interest” (p.258). In this regard Deuze (2006) asserts that this sense of community belonging is what blurs the divides between members of the same culture emphasizing community involvement rather than simply individual expression. Social media then reinforces minorities sense of involvement rather than their “otherness”. Youssef Boutahar (2019), however; in his most recent publication on minorities claims that minorities are the subaltern others. Despite the comprehensive view he offers of the minority groups’ case in light of the Marrakech declaration, his whole publication draws a gloomy picture of the Moroccan country’s will to recognize minorities individual liberties.

Media sphere according to Cunliffe (2007) provide a voice to the voiceless as the platform tolerates difference among people with different convictions but yet sharing single unified perspectives. The online space although diverse and includes heterogeneous groups enables its users to transcend social imprisonment. Cunliffe (2007) further argues that people migrate to the digital world, that they consider their “homeland”, to claim their rights. In other words, minorities negotiate the social tensions they face in real spheres to virtually communicate their sentiment to the leader majority.

3. Moroccan Minorities and Patterns of Social/ Digital Exclusion

In the Moroccan context little has been said about minorities as the issue is considered taboo. Homosexuality is illegal and punishable in Morocco. In 2014, six men were sentenced of six years of imprisonment under article 489 of the penal code, on charges that included “unnatural acts with an individual of the same sex”. On the 12th of May of the same year, police arrested two men for homosexual acts along with incitement to prostitution and public drunkenness. One of them was sentenced to three years in prison and the other to two and a half years. According to the Ministry of Justice there were 81 prosecutions for homosexuality since 2011, though it is unknown how many of these resulted in conviction. Now, because there is no real national stage where gay activists can present their case and advocate publically for their rights, LGBTQ+ groups often focus their activism within the social network to retain some form of anonymity. In fact, it will be a long road for gay activists to achieve their goals, but the gay movement in digital media is only a beginning towards securing an affirmative existence.

As far as Moroccan religious minority is concerned, the Christians community claim that authorities refuse their openness. Religious minorities suffer marginalization and exclusion and in response to this, they have migrated to social media to highlight the common challenges faced by their community. In the same vein, Shias and the Baha’Is have chosen Facebook as a virtual platform for freedom of expression. In real life, they face charges of threatening the stability of the country in case they think of going public with their beliefs and practices. The minority community, in fact, despite being diverse and/or fragmented it is yet connected (Yang, 2002). Although it is split up according to areas of interest, online minorities on the networking platform play an essential role in bridging the offline and the online community. In this respect, the digital world stands as a free space for equality and freedom of expression.

4. Individual Liberty, Human Rights’ Discourse and “Otherness Profiling” of Minorities in the Name of National Security

Securitization, as closely linked to state sovereignty, is privileged in all the discussions about national security (Koppel, 2017). The security discourse constructs the state as the necessary focus of protection from all the possible threats that could exist in the inside or in the anarchic realm (Campbell, 1998b). Securing lives, according to Shepherd’s ‘logic of security’ (2015) is essential for any state. So, removing individuals and their interests from the security agenda would be an impossible task. Security in the case of this paper should be

understood through the lens of ‘human security’ that includes the particularity of individuals’ rights. In practice, it is central to all the understandings of the processes and consequences of so-called democracy.

The way a state frames the language of security explains further how individual liberty remains a subject of the political debate which suggests that liberty, as a basic constituent of democracy ideals, might be incompatible with the politics of security of a nation (Aradau 2004: 399). Following the logic of national security, securitization has no fixed meaning or essence. A state can change its political stance on security matters and neglect individual rights or minorities rights where and when rights do not fit within the framework of traumatic events. States can even use different languages of security that rely on nondemocratic procedures. World governments in general adopt threat-defense thinking and state-centered solutions that privilege the sovereign and his position of power. In other words, the dominant voices, according to Matt McDonald, contribute “to the silencing of marginal voices and ignore the way citizens attempt to contest the security practices” (2008: 574). Security in practice is more complex; its usage is undesirable as it involves essentially a negative value. However, it is necessary to engage with security rather than dismiss it and make it more suitable to the aims of citizens’ interests.

The systematization of human rights follows the way in which different categories of rights are bearing some specific human needs. There are the rights of a man that belong to the human being, and they rise from his specific needs, and there are certain rights which can belong to the states and other institutions. Human rights of a man can be economic, social (civic), legal, cultural, individual or collective. According to the Moroccan Constitution, no one shall be the object of any arbitrary interference in his or her private life. However, the rights established are not usually affirmed as the degree of the protection of freedoms varies.

The challenge between civil liberties and the governing regime comes to the surface when liberties are violated using arbitrary arrest and detention. So, a number of rights that are aspects of individuals’ autonomy including freedom of expression can be violated under the excuse of preserving the social order. Sometimes freedoms are curtailed, the exercise of freedom of expression is not often allowed in its fullest meaning even on social media platforms. Constitutional rights might privilege, in certain cases, the interest of the larger society over the interest of the individual/minority, however; personal privacy is worth a legal protection as there is not such a thing as rights that should be more protected or less protected.

Freedom of expression is required in the process of democracy to shape the government's actions.

Among the principles of liberty is the free exercise of religious practices, which could be considered as perhaps the ultimate reach of individual emancipation. In Morocco, religion is an issue of a political community. Since, Moroccan Muslims are projected to remain a majority in the country; religious minorities are not allowed to openly practice their faith as they generally receive varying degrees of official restrictions.

Minority religious groups claim that they are prohibited to embrace the religion they want. Shia known as 'the silent community' in the country is reluctant to disclose its religious belief in public. The baha'i community besides to other minority religions claim further that they are forbidden to practice their faith as they face issues of religious coexistence.

Minorities are therefore marginalized so that the religious faith of a country can be in accordance with national standards which societies decide to adopt. Granting religious rights to minority groups can fuel the social tensions while securing the stable religious faith of the leader majority, that commands general acceptance of faith, would secure the whole state. In other words, a state is required to find the right balance between minorities' quest for freedom and granting a peaceful space for the social community.

As far as the LGBSTQ+ is concerned, we can say that they are the most vulnerable group, as they prefer to be silent in this conflict-related environment because of the violence and insecurity they face when they reveal their preference. Most of them choose media platforms to voice out their concerns but with reservation. Protecting this intimate right then is beyond reach as most of them face verbal/written violence on Facebook, however; the digital platform would still serve as an outlet for most LGBTQ+ community as it offers space for "otherness inclusiveness" (embodiment of the principled pluralism which would allow for a more diverse virtual citizenship). As a result, "virtual democracy" takes place to promote co-existence in the midst of this social/sexual disagreement.

Conclusion

The peaceful virtual demonstrations of minorities in the digital media suggest a new definition of nationhood. Social/virtual cohesion of the marginalized shapes a new national identity of the subalterns. The political landscape of the state changes by creating new ideologies of online inclusion in an attempt to influence the official ideology towards new agendas. While there are those who argue that minorities are not integrated in the Moroccan

society, minorities claim that they do not identify themselves as alienated from the nation state; in contrast to the expectation of the leader majority, they identify themselves as nationalist inclusive citizens.

Individual freedom that minorities strive for is definitely important, but yet it is not as much important as the security of the common body. The power of the majority rule to generate peace could only make sense when absolute freedom threatens individuals' lives. In this case, democracy is not seen here as a producer/protector of liberty; instead, it is regarded as a mean to secure the individual who has to subject his general will to the ruling majority. The exercise of power can sometimes be democratic or non-democratic depending on whether or not democracy matches certain requirements. The majority rule reigns in every nation and the framework of freedom faces a world-wide reduction in an attempt to provide a more widely secure state system.

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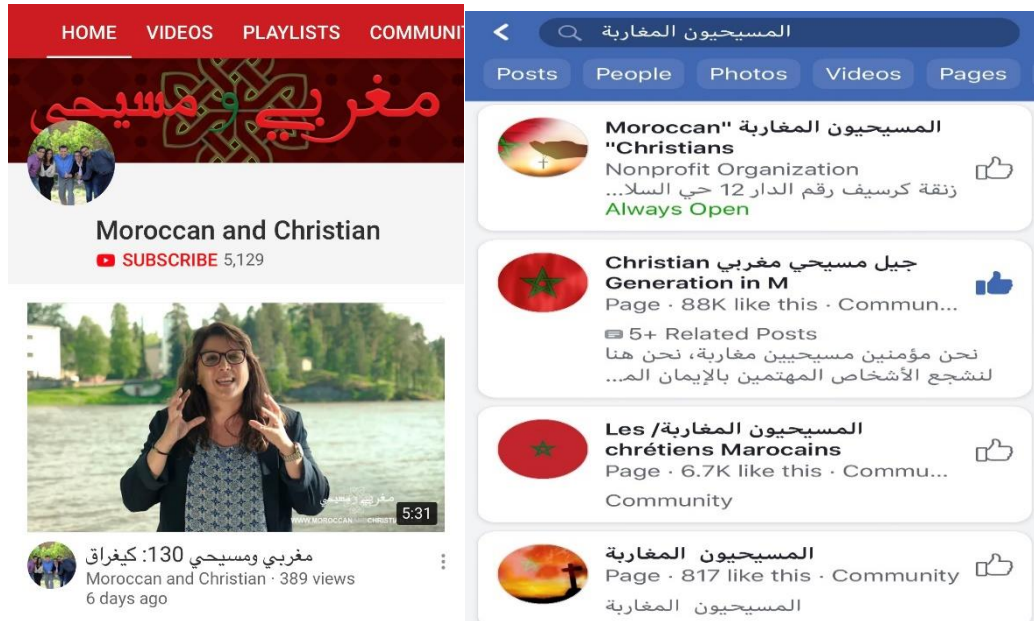
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Appendix:





Content in the shots listed above represent Moroccan minorities' fight for online existence and/or virtual inclusion

