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## Paper 221

### **Digital activism as nexus analysis: A sociolinguistic example from Arabic Twitter**

by

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**Digital Activism as Nexus Analysis:  
A Sociolinguistic Example from Arabic Twitter**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper aims to satisfy three goals based on recent sociolinguistic developments in social media research: (a) It theorizes (digital) activism as a form of nexus analysis, and in so doing, the paper demonstrates the effectiveness of an integrative mediated discourse approach to social media research; (b) it documents an historic movement of actions punishable by law but enabled by Arab agency and Twitter; and (c) it registers my lived experience as a female Muslim Arab researcher conducting social media research on Islamic religious reform. As both a methodological paper and a qualitative investigation of Arab Muslim identity as constructed on Twitter, the paper further raises questions about the ethical, methodological, and personal perils of conducting social media projects in the Arabic context (and beyond). Accordingly, the paper contributes to Arab identity construction and digital discourse theory and method.<sup>1</sup>

**KEYWORDS**

Digital activism, digital discourse, Arabic Twitter, religious reform, mediated discourse analysis, nexus analysis, sociolinguistic theory and method.

**1. Social media and Arab activism**

Technology has played a central role in religious activism within the Arabic context. For example, cassette tapes were used in 1980s Oman to record and distribute religious sermons, thus making knowledge accessible to the masses that hitherto was solely owned by scholars (Eickelman, 1983). When mobile phones were introduced in the 1990s, young females in Arabia promptly adopted them as tools to challenge religious gendered norms (Al Zidjaly and Gordon, 2012). The Internet was then appropriated by Arab Muslims to create a Habermasian public sphere to deliberate on religion and politics (Anderson and Eickelman, 2003). I examined the nature of this public sphere (see also Zweiri and Murphy, 2011); the findings demonstrated how Arab Muslims, aimed at reconciling Islam with the 21st century, used Yahoo religious chatrooms to turn religiously taboo topics (what Bakhtin [1981] terms *authoritative discourses*) into *internally persuasive discourses* open for discussion (see Al Zidjaly, 2010, 2015 for details; see also Lövheim and Campbell,

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is part of a larger project on digital activism and the Arab culture and mind.

2017 for more on digital religion). When Yahoo chatrooms were replaced with the WhatsApp chatting messenger in late 2012, Arabs (especially those in the Arabian Gulf) immediately adapted the new chatting forum to privately manage socio-cultural concerns through the daily creation and exchanges of multimodal texts that touch upon Arab identity from the bottom up (Al Zidjaly, 2010, 2014, 2017). Engagement in the new democratic and mostly reasonably albeit hostile (Al Zidjaly, 2012, 2017; Tracy, 2008) discourses continued on Facebook and Twitter, with a focus on political activism (Khosravinik and Sarkhoh, 2017; Nordenson, 2018; Sinatora, 2019; Sumiala and Korpiola, 2017; Zayani 2018). These cases demonstrate that despite the region's limits on freedom of expression, Arabs have creatively, covertly (often anonymously), and agentively usurped new media technologies as platforms to manage socio-religious and political concerns. I argue the extent of ramification of these activities has not yet been fully grasped. This is a critical gap in digital discourse research.

In this methodological and analytical paper, I am motivated by calls to allow what people do through technology to guide the next wave of social media research (Georgakopoulou and Spilioti, 2016). I specifically build upon digital research that highlights the multimodality of meaning-making (Bateman, 2014), the documenting of the lived experience of conducting social media research (Angouri, 2016), and the capturing of the mutually constitutive links between micro real-time actions and macro discourses and practices (KhosraviNik, 2015, 2016). The general aim is to report on a bottom-up project that I have undertaken to examine unique actions by Arabs on Twitter circa 2011. In the process, I suggest an understanding of social media activism as a form of nexus analysis centralized on mediated actions.

The paper is divided into three sections: I identify the problems in digital research from a discourse analysis and new media perspectives. I propose a solution: a nexus analysis approach to digital activism (and social media research in general). I demonstrate the effectiveness of the approach through data from Arabic Twitter.

## **2. The conundrum in digital research**

Traditional linguistic approaches, which synchronize *context* and highlight discourse, have failed to capture the multimodality of human interaction, made visible by social media; they also have failed to properly theorize the mutually constitutive links between micro and macro actions, key to understanding social change. Further, to meaningfully contribute to the discourse on social media and change (i.e. whether or not social media actions lead to slacktivism [Morozof, 2011] or revolution [Blommaert, 2017b]), I argue one needs to ground actions in larger discourses, as social change is precipitated by micro day-to-day actions (Scollon and Scollon 2004), and the two are mutually constitutive (Al Zidjaly, 2006). However, this connection between micro and macro actions has proved problematic (Erickson, 2004; Wolover 2014). As the lines between online actions and offline realities have become increasingly porous (Locher et al, (2015), digital discourse researchers have found themselves pressed to adequately theorize context, adopt multimodality, and seek (new) methodologies to accurately capture what people do on (and with) social media. A reimagination of sociolinguistics (Blommaert, 2018a, 2019) has been proposed more

attuned to reality and social theory (see also Georgakopoulou and Spilioti, 2016; KhosraviNik, 2015; Bou-Franch and Blitvich, 2018). Accordingly, several methodologies have been suggested, mainly *the chronotope model* by Blommaert (2015a, 2015b, 2018b; see also Blommaert and De Fina, 2017). This model blurs the distinction between micro actions and context through theorizing communicative moves as actions grounded in timespace configurations and features of various indexical order or scales, that over a period of time are turned into recognizable formats, guiding the behavior of people engaged in a specific activity.

To fully understand the workings of social change, however, a new theorization of digital activism is needed.

### **3. The resolution: Digital activism as nexus analysis**

I argue that digital activism, whether social, cultural, religious, political, is best theorized as a nexus analysis because larger discourses are grounded in the micro day-to-day actions that foment revolutionary change. The nexus analysis approach I adopt in this paper was developed by Scollon (2001) and Scollon and Scollon (2004) at the onset of new media use to specifically capture the intricacies of human interaction (see Norris and Jones, 2005 and Al Zidjaly, 2015 for an overview). I now turn to three key features of this approach, which I henceforth collectively refer to as a mediated discourse and nexus analysis (MDNA) approach as in my view the theory and methodology need to be used together.

**3.1 The unit of analysis:** The unit of analysis in a mediated nexus project is the mediated action (i.e. the moment social actors engage in real time actions within complex networks of linked micro/macro (chronotopic) discourse and practices using mediational means or cultural tools, such as language or material objects (tablets or smartphones). Highlighting action rather than discourse is key to this approach. The focus on action stems from recognition in MDNA of the multimodality of meaning-making and the duality of discourse to act, at different times, as both (a) a main action or (b) a mediational means through which the main action takes place. This conceptualization allows researchers to take stock of all actions (discursive or non-discursive) key to the questions being investigated, regardless of mode. Accordingly, liking on Twitter can be the main action at times, while the language of the tweets itself is foregrounded at other times. A growing norm is the interplay between textual and visual actions.

**3.2 Actions as grounded:** MDNA actions are never to be examined in vacuum, as they always result as a combination of the scene in which actions take place and the agents involved with specific mediational means, and are governed by specific chronotopic discourses of varying scales that have to come together in a particular moment in history, which Scollon (2001) calls “the site of engagement.” The moment that all relevant components come through for one particular action to take place. By deconstructing *context* to the relevant actors, mediational means, and discourses needed to make a particular action both possible and meaningful, the problem of how much horizontal and vertical data (KhosraviNik, 2015) is needed for a digital research project is resolved.

**3.3 Integrative approach:** By highlighting mediated actions and theorizing discourse as a form (or as a means) of action, MDNA provides a convergent point where non-discursive social theories (e.g. activity theory) are brought together with theories that centralize language (e.g. communication, media and discourse analysis) or the dialectical relationship between discourse and action (e.g. ethnography of communication). Because it encourages collecting all sorts of data, MDNA allows the use of any analytical framework deemed fit for analysis. These unique features make it an integrative theory applicable across academic fields, including new media, communication, sociology, multimodality, etc. (additionally, MDNA builds on the tenets of various discursive and non-discursive approaches to discourse and action). As a result, a few other linguists over the years have suggested adopting the Scollon's (2001) mediated discourse analysis as a possible framework to online research in general (e.g. Georgakopoulou, 2006; Jones et al, 2015; and KhosraviNik, 2015).

In this paper, however, my argument is that digital activism specifically must be theorized as a nexus analysis; the focus on activism projects accordingly should not solely be on capturing the actions of social media users in vacuum; rather the focus should be on how larger discourses are grounded in people's actions on social media platforms, and how the latter feed into and create social change in their daily lives. This is the only means through which to measure the effects of digital activism, and it can only be achieved through adopting a longitudinal; ethnographic; interdiscursive; and a mediated, grounded and multimodal approach to actions.

#### **4. The demonstration/analysis**

Scollon and Scollon (2004) devised a three-step methodology to guide a nexus of practices approach based on the tenants of mediated discourse theory: engaging the nexus of practice (data collection), navigating the nexus analysis (analysis), and changing the nexus of practice (role of researcher in the study). In the remainder of the paper, I (a) analyze one of the main actions of the Ex-Muslim community on Twitter; (b) demonstrate the effectiveness of MDNA for social media activism research and (c) report on my lived experience as a female Arab researcher involved in documenting historic but precarious actions among Arab Muslims.

##### **4.1 Engaging the nexus of practice: Pre-analysis (data collection)**

The first step in conducting an MDNA project is to select a social cause and mark its various constituents by collecting relevant data. I explored the formation of a potent online community that systematically engages in forbidden actions. Its actions have shifted the practices of many individuals across Arabia. Two clarifications are in order: First, I refer to the ambient affiliations (Zappavigna, 2011) or light practices (Blommaert, 2017a, 2019; Blommaert and Varis, 2015) I observed on Twitter as a "community," even though I do not mark its boundaries or what makes it a community. Thus, I embrace not only the fuzziness of online/offline boundaries (Locher et al, 2015; Blommaert, 2016, 2017a), but also the fuzziness of online communities (Bruckman, 2005), in keeping with calls to conduct bottom-up studies with no apriori assumptions about what counts as a community (Angouri

2016; Al Zidjaly, 2019a). Second, the project on Arab Ex-Muslim community is part of two larger funded ethnographic, longitudinal research projects to examine social media and Arab identity, with a focus on Oman (2012-2014 and 2015-2019). My research has focused on Arab actions online/offline as apropos to religion since the inception of new media technology and has amassed over 50,000 (and counting) WhatsApp messages; over 60,000 (and counting) Tweets; and 5,000 snapchats and Facebook discussions. The collection of various types of social media data was complemented with ethnographic observations: As part of the Language and Culture course I taught for seven years at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman, my students wrote over 100 final projects on their lived experiences with social media. I also conducted interviews and focus groups with leading members of the Ex-Muslim community.

While this paper focuses on the actions of a few leaders of the Ex-Muslim community, the community is heterogeneous, consisting of members with differing degrees of belief. Some key members are celebrated intellectuals from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia who do not admit to leaving Islam, but rather construct themselves as humanists, liberals and/or secularists. Separation of religion and politics by questioning Islamic authoritative discourses (albeit to a lesser degree than self-admitted Ex-Muslims) is the goal. Those who self-identify as Quranics, who believe only in the teachings of the Quran and reject all other Islamic teachings, also constitute members of the community. Therefore, they and the liberals are positioned as covert Ex-Muslims. I highlight the actions of the Saudi members in particular as they are from the Arabian Gulf, homeland of Islam and my home as well, where freedom of expression is especially limited. The Arabian Gulf is a collective, relatively “homogenous” imagined community (almost all nationals are Muslims and speak Arabic) and resistant to change. Religion in Arabia is engrained in daily practices and religious scholars also are revered. Men who fail to participate publicly in daily prayers suffer loss of face and may experience social ostracism. Therefore, while efforts to reform Islam in more heterogeneous Arab societies in North Africa remain problematic, engaging in such acts in the Arabian Gulf is perceived as especially heinous (Whitaker, 2016). Moreover, the Twitter Ex-Muslim community is led by people from Saudi Arabia, where Wahhabism, a strict form of Islam, is practiced. Notably, the Arab social media report (Salem, 2017) illustrates that Saudis are the most active Arabs on Twitter, suggesting that Saudi women and men overcome their ostensible lack of agency through technology (especially WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter), in which realm they have covertly played key roles in leading the religiously strict Arabian Gulf countries towards change.

Now that I have selected a social cause, the next step in an MDNA project is to identify the components of the nexus. Identification must occur from the point of view of the researcher and the participants involved because nexus analysis projects are participatory, akin to mainstream ethnography where both the researcher and research participants are part of the study. The following sections describe these components (mediated action, mediational means, social actors and relevant cycles of discourses) in more detail.

**4.1.1 Mediated actions:** In this study, the main mediated action was tweeting to form the Ex-Muslim community and circulate challenging ideas that have percolated across Arabia,

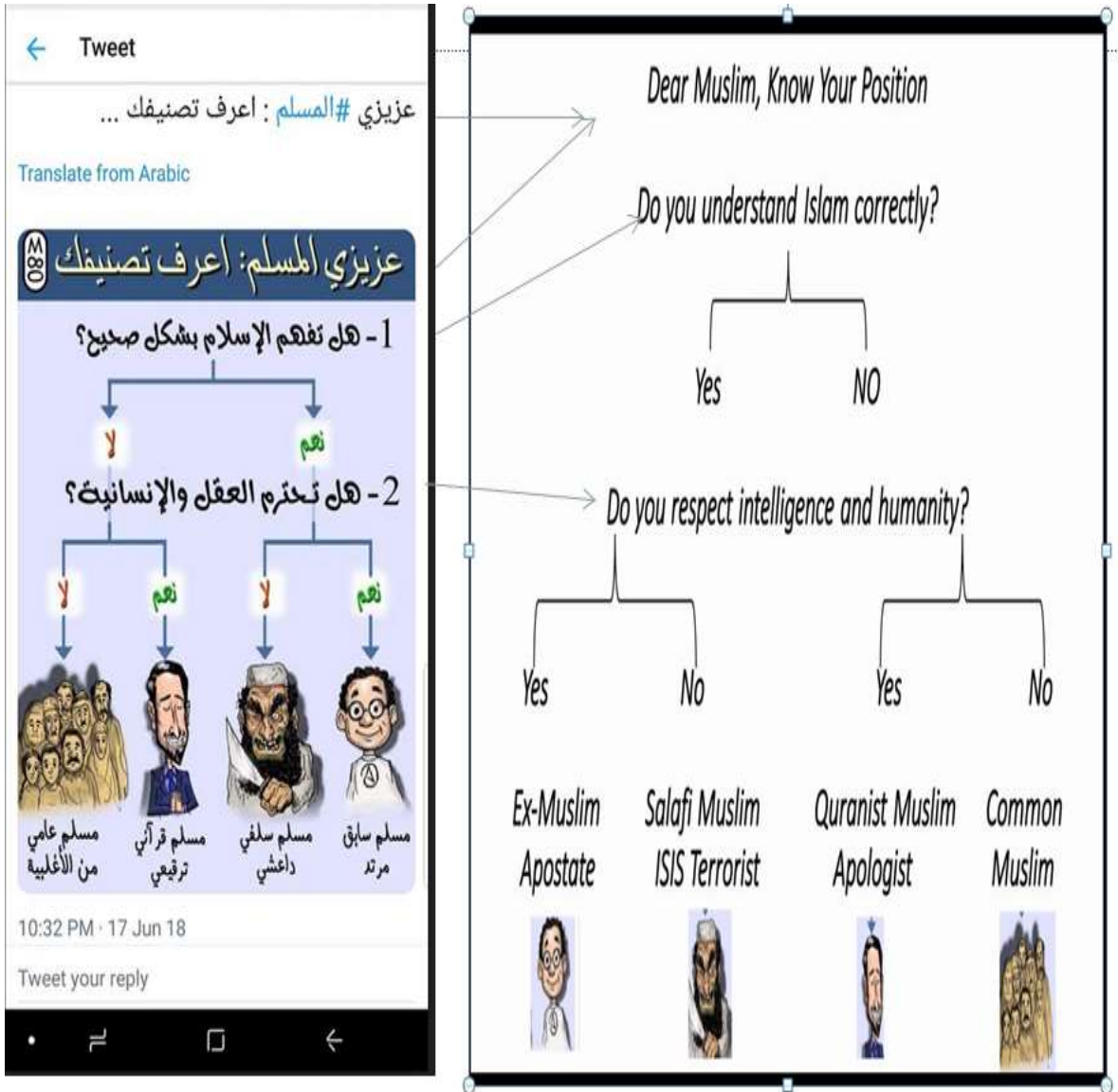
despite official efforts to halt them. As high level actions (Norris 2011), tweets can be deconstructed into the following:

- Discrediting Islamic teachings and books, including the Quran, the holy book of Islam (e.g. through humor, satire, facts, repair, rhetorical questions [see Al Zidjaly 2019b for details])
- Creating and sharing informative videos, facts, quotations and books on relevant discourses by Arab and international voices. Most confront lies about Islamic information widely circulated in school textbooks
- Rewriting the officially presented history of Islam
- Engaging in citizen sociolinguistics (Rhymes, 2014) or linguistic exercises, such as redefining key terms (e.g. freedom as the right to choose instead of the right to be immoral) and replacing key terms with more accurate versions (e.g. referring to Islamic crusades as *Islamic invasions* rather than *Islamic openings*, as used in Arabic discourse)
- Engaging in rebuttals or public debates between Ex-Muslim account holders and those who identify as Muslims
- Leaving follower comments and meta-comments that range from support to trolling.
- Retweeting intermittently, liking and/or sharing (mostly by lurking followers)
- Retweeting (by account holders) private direct messages sent by anonymous lurkers
- Identifying and examining questionable cultural practices (e.g. lack of empathy, *Shamata* [the practice of finding joy in others' misery], the ubiquitous ideology of being Muslim first and human second)

**4.1.2 Mediation means:** The main mediational means I have identified is Twitter, which I theorize as a cultural tool that can be used to enhance certain actions (e.g. forming ambient affiliations [Zappavigna, 2011]) while constraining others (e.g. Twitter allows only 147 characters per tweet and the publication of short videos only).

**4.1.3 Social actors:** Two identities (strict Muslims and moderate Muslims) are often recognized in mainstream discourse on Islam. Twitter and social media, in general, have helped everyday Arab Muslims create other identities from the bottom-up. I have identified the Arabic culture as The Patching culture and grouped the bottom-up identities into two general categories: Patchers, who provide systematic justifications of the problematic issues with Islam (e.g. child marriage in Islam), and Non-Patchers, further divided into Salafis (strict Muslims), humanists and Ex-Muslims. Salafis accept child marriage as part of Islam, whereas the latter two reject the practice. In delineating the characteristics of each group, I depended on the definitions provided in the tweets in The Ex-Muslim community and the definitions provided by a key anonymous leader of the community from Saudi Arabia, whose actions will be discussed in the next section. Figure 1 theorized as a mediated action (see Al Zidjaly, 2011) created and circulated by Ex-Muslims sums up the criteria behind current Arab identity representation enabled by social media. According to the members of the Ex-Muslim community, the classification of modern Arab Muslims are guided by two criteria: Those who understand Islam correctly and those who do not; and those who respect logic and humanity, and those who do not. Those who understand Islamic teachings correctly but decide to respect logic and humanity become Ex-Muslims

(Apostates); those who understand Islam correctly but do not respect either logic or humanity become the Salafis (i.e. ISIS or Daish-type Muslims who are strict, intolerant and possibly violent in thought or action). These two sub-groups make up the non-Patchers.



### Mediated Action 1: Arab Muslims on Twitter

Here is a detailed classification/representation of current Muslim identities based on mediated action 1 by Arab Ex-Muslims on Twitter; it is a top-down category:

**A. The Non-Patchers:** The group I describe as non-Patchers admits to the problematic teachings of Islam (i.e. assaulting women), which they do not attempt to cover-up through justifications. The difference between the two sub-groups (Ex-Muslim and Daish-Type Muslim) is that the former decided not to accept Islamic teachings that according to the Ex-



Muslim group go against humanity and logic; the latter has accepted them unconditionally. The indirect point made by Ex-Muslims in the above mediated action is that Islam (source texts) promote violence and intolerance; therefore, if one understands them and cares for humanity and logic, they leave Islam. Here is more on the two sub-groups:

**1. Ex-Muslims:** After studying Islam carefully, the members of this group decided not to stand by its history, books and tenants out of respect for humanity and logic. Some Ex-Muslims converted to Christianity, but most turned agnostics or seculars. This group is heterogeneous: It includes anonymous thinkers and writers of both gender with differing scales of beliefs. While the Arab 2018 social media report indicates law presence of Arabian females on social media, many active Ex-Muslims are females from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. This subgroup also includes non-anonymous writers who have YouTube shows such as Brother Rachid and Hamid Abdel Samad. Both had to flee their Arab countries. It further includes writers from Kuwait who do not admit to leaving Islam but continue discrediting many authoritative discourses. They call themselves liberals requesting the separation of religion and state to move the Arabian Gulf towards the 21st century (a prominent writer from Kuwait is Abdul-Aziz Al-Qinai, who was imprisoned in 2018 for two months for one of his discrediting actions).

**2. Daishi Muslims:** Those who stand by the holes in Islamic thought and teachings are referred to as Dawaish (plural) or Daishi (singular), as metaphorically belonging to the militant group ISIS or Daish. The members of this group do not apologize for the atrocities of Islamic past; in fact, they practice a stricter view of Islam than salafis and dream of one day turning the world into a Caliphate. The members of this group are not necessarily part of the militant group ISIS, but rather they believe in a strict unapologetic form of Islam.

**B. The Patchers:** The group I call The Patchers consists of those who do not fathom Islam and its teachings; if they happen to care for logic and humanity, according to the creators of the meme, they become Quranic Muslims (who attempt to fill the holes found in the Quran); if they lack logic and humanity, they become everyday Muslims, which makes up the majority of Muslims. This group is called the Patchers because they tend to patch (instead of acknowledge and fix) the holes (problems) in Islam pinpointed by Ex-Muslims. An example of patching is when Muslims attempt to defend the criticism that the Quran encourages physically assaulting women (mediated actions 2 and 3) by suggesting that the Arabic verb *beat* in the Quran (erroneously) means *abandon*, not physical assault. Patchers in addition are selective, highlighting the peaceful instructions of Islam and rejecting the violent tenants. Here is more on the two sub-groups:

**1. Quranic Muslims:** Most Quranics used to be enlighteners focused on modernizing Islam with their own admission. Quranics only believe in the holy book of Islam as the word of God and reject all other authoritative discourses, books and teachings on Islam, including the hadiths or the reported sayings of the prophet of Islam. They are Patchers because they patch all the problematic instructions in the Quran that go against humanity and logic (i.e. never admit to problems in the Quran, only justify them). (My ethnographic observations point to a pattern (see also mediated action 7): Many Ex-Muslims started as enlighteners during the Yahoo religious chatroom days, focused on understanding Islam

following the attacks on New York city in 2001. Then they switched to Quranics prior to renouncing Islam.)

**2. The Commoners:** This group makes up the majority of Muslims who share with moderate Muslims the lack of deep knowledge of Islamic rules and teachings; they are mostly harmless as they highlight the peaceful teachings of Islam and provide justifications for the problematic ones but they do exhibit intolerant ideas justified by authoritative texts.

The categories are non-exhaustive; in addition to the listed above, there exists on Twitter two more active Islamic identities:

**1. Cute Muslims (Patchers):** The members of this group differ than traditional reformers, moderates, or commoners in their extremely rosy picture of the Islamic religion; as a result, in their attempt to reconcile Islam with the modern world, they do not admit the existence of any problems or contradictions in all Islamic teachings; in contrast, they present an idealistic view of the teachings that does not correspond to reality. Using an English term (in Arabic script) saved for children is belittling, as it highlights adult child-like ignorance, not innocence.

**2. Mustashrif/Guardians (Non-Patchers):** The members of this group not only practice an intolerant version of Islam, they take it upon themselves to watch, troll and bully others into practicing their strict view of Islam. Most, according to Athanius and others on Twitter, are hypocrites (unlike Salafis or Dawaish) because they publically present a holier than thou version of themselves; privately they engage in non-Islamic acts like drinking alcohol.

Besides highlighting the social actors involved in a particular action, an MNDA project necessitates capturing the interaction order (Goffman 1981) or the social arrangement between them, as it helps in identifying the roles played by all parties taking action. Accordingly, I applied Goffman's (1981) production format to the Ex-Muslim community. I deconstructed the relevant social actors into groups: (a) tweet authors, who create them; (b) tweet animators, who share them; and (c) tweet principals, who like them. Often, an individual may enact all three roles or, through lurking, overtly enact none. Notwithstanding lurkers' (or overhearers') intentions for silently following Ex-Muslim accounts (i.e. whether for support, curiosity or fun), an account holder's number of followers indicates his or her power of presence, thus affording credence and covert principality to his or her actions. Goffman's production format, created to capture the footing shifts inherent in talk, proved useful in my project. First, the approach foregrounded the complexity involved in tweeting, liking or sharing actions prohibited by law. Practically, I found it to help actors evade or take responsibility for problematic tweets, and analytically, it clarified everyone's role in forming the community and keeping ideas circulated. The approach also highlighted the co-constructed nature of human agency.

Goffman's participation framework (1981) also proved helpful in this study. While the existence of a limited number of online communities with no physical manifestation for political reasons has been documented (e.g. Kunming and Blommaert, 2017), this Arab online community is unique, given its breaking down of known participation frameworks.

For instance, although the community consists of leading anonymous and non-anonymous former covert and overt Ex-Muslims and their thousands of followers, the main action often takes place on Ex-Muslims accounts between former and current Muslims, who engage in debates watched silently—either by the unaddressed ratified participants (Goffman, 1981) or by followers withholding response, including light practices (Blommaert, 2017) such as liking or sharing for fear of prosecution. Lurking in the Ex-Muslim community is precipitated by fear of prosecution, as challenging Islamic doctrines is punishable by law. Another anomaly of community formation evident in my findings is that the Arab Ex-Muslim community is not an extension of an offline existence, signalling that social media help create new identities (rather than simply extend offline identities). Moreover, my findings suggest that the online forbidden actions taking place on Twitter are, in a clandestine and slow, yet steady manner, taking roots and shifting the very fabric of Islamic societies in yet unforeseen ways. Other interactions involve the support that community leaders receive from each other by commenting, sharing or liking particular contents (to compensate for the lack in interaction by followers). Applying Goffman's production and participation frameworks has highlighted the complexity and intricacies involved in managing the Ex-Muslims community and helped indicate the roles played by all involved in shifting Arab consciousness and practices.

**4.1.1 Cycles of discourses:** To understand the actions of the Ex-Muslim community and measure their effects, I monitored the following chronotopic discourses:

- Islamic authoritative discourses (e.g. the Quran, the hadiths [i.e. the reported scriptures of the prophet of Islam documented in the books of Sahih Al-Bukhari and Sahih Al-Muslim], additional authoritative books on Islam that have come to shape Islamic practices in the Arabian Gulf)
- Cultural beliefs and practices (e.g. women are inferior to men)
- The history of Islam and pre-Islam
- My own and my students' actions and projects
- Political and social events that coincided with the data collection period. Such events included the rise in Twitter participation in the Arabian Gulf countries; wars and tensions between Arabian Gulf countries; Arabian governments' acknowledgment of the spread of atheism in the Arabian Gulf and their subsequent actions (e.g. curtailing freedom of speech, criminalizing atheism, persecuting twitters); concurrent calls in 2018 to reform Islamic texts by French leaders, the Egyptian leader, and the Saudi government; and the historic decision of the Tunisian government in 2018 to replace Sharia law with civil laws that guarantee equal rights to all Tunisians

It must be noted that according to the tenets of MDNA, neither the Ex-Muslims nor Twitter is the focus or instigator of the religious shift documented in this paper; rather, it is the social actors' appropriation of the affordances of Twitter as a cultural tool using high tech smartphones. This distinction further means that in a mediated project, a tweet is not just a tweet; it is an (often multimodal) action taken on Twitter by particular Ex-Muslims using primarily a smartphone or tablet to create an interplay between verbal and visual modes in a particular historical period for specific purposes. Therefore, the same action can mean

different things depending on who is taking the action and when, where and why the action is taken (e.g. an American tweeting sarcastically about the Christian religion in America might gain little attention, whereas an Arab in Arabia tweeting sarcastically about Islam may subsequently be executed). Constructing actions as interpretable only within the nexus of practice in which they occur further illuminates the agency (and courage) of social media users (especially in undemocratic contexts) and the collaborative process of meaning-production by clarifying the specific roles one can play in each mediated action.

## **4.2 Navigating the nexus of practice: Analysis**

To analyze my data, I appropriated the following analytical frameworks: interactional sociolinguistics (Tannen, 2005), multimodality (Kress and van Luewen, 1996) and approaches that highlight the interplay between texts and images (Bateman, 2014). In this section, I briefly analyze five examples that illustrate the efficiency of a longitudinal, ethnographic and integrative approach to (Arab) activism.

### **4.2.1 Mediated actions to discredit authoritative discourses**

Herein, I provide five examples representative of the kinds of precarious actions and interaction orders the Ex-Muslim community on Twitter systematically engages in that have also shifted practices. The type described in this section is discrediting the main authoritative books of Islam, an action punishable by jail or death. My ethnographic research indicate that Arab Muslims used Yahoo religious chatrooms in the 1990s to turn authoritative discourses into internally persuasive discourses (Bakhtin, 1981) open for discussion (Al Zidjaly, 2010). At the onset of the Islamic religious deliberation by the masses during the early 2000s, the Quran remained authoritative. However, this too has changed, and now all Islamic texts are fair game in the Ex-Muslim community. Mediated action 2 (Figure 2) also references the discourse of Islam and the honoring of women, a key theme being discredited within the community. The importance of discrediting the cultural adage that Islam honors women is that this authoritative claim often acts as a barrier to implementing women's rights. The argument in most Islamic societies that have signed the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) treaty with reservations, reads: Since Islam honors women, there exists no need for women's rights such as the right for women to inherit equally as men. Through intertextually referencing verses from the Quran that demonstrate the opposite (that Islam does not honor women), the leaders of the Ex-Muslim community also discredit the most authoritative discourse in Islam, the Quran, which is constructed as the word of God.

The first action in this example is initiated and sustained by Ziy and Athanasius, two active and anonymous Ex-Muslims from Saudi Arabia, who define themselves as factual, logical and caring about the cause of women in Arabia. Note that the actual tweets in Arabic are on the left side; the translations in English are to the right. The text in blue is an analysis I conducted on the photo used (For details on discrediting linguistic strategies used by Ex-Muslims on Twitter, including intertextuality, humor, and sarcasm, see Al Zidjaly, 2019b).

## Islam Honors Women – Discredit from Quran

**Ziy:** Holy Quran's honoring of women from the chapter on women Series of tweets.. (source: verses 1-66)

**Photo of rebellion:** woman engaged in committing several forbidden acts: drinking wine, staring the reader in the eye, long painted nails, red lipstick. This is a challenge (bring it on).

**Athanasius:** The funny thing is that the Muslim woman brags that there is a chapter in the Quran on women without realizing that the chapter humiliates her.

DISCREDIT

PRE-EMPTIVE DISCREDIT

### Mediated Action 2: Does Quran honor women?

Judging by the avatar used in her profile picture, Ziy identifies with female warriors (her avatar is Tauriel, a fictional warrior character from the film adaptation of J. R. R. Tolkien's book, *The Hobbit*). Although Athanasius reports in his Twitter bio that he subscribes to no religion, he appears to identify with religious reformers and philosophers (his avatar is that of a thinking man and his pseudonym is of a notable Christian reformer). In the above tweet (of several to follow), which I theorize as a mediated action (see Author 2011 for details), Ziy announces that over a series of forthcoming tweets she will discuss the discourse of Islam's honoring of women. Indirectly, given her known position as an Ex-Muslim, she signals that she will demonstrate the opposite: Islam's dishonoring of women by intertextually referencing the Quran—specifically verses from the chapter on women.

This discourse on women is of great importance, as aforementioned, especially in Saudi Arabia where Wahhabism is practiced and women are controlled through male guardianship. Generally, Ex-Muslims argue that discrediting the cultural authoritative discourse that Islam honors women is essential to set forth a much-needed movement to secularism, individual choice and women's rights (consistent with Ex-Muslims' goals).

The mediated action of a rebellious act (discrediting authoritative cultural discourses and books) is heightened by an image of a woman engaged in several defiant acts: drinking wine; staring directly at the reader, which according to Van Leeuwen's (1996) taxonomy creates equality and challenge; and displaying sex appeal through long, darkly painted nails and dark red lipstick. These represented verbal and nonverbal actions are forbidden for women in many strict Islamic societies. Bateman (2014) explains that this alignment among actions strengthens the message: Together, the announcement and accompanying image create the challenge of "bring it on."

Athanasius, a second leader of the community from Saudi Arabia and follower of Ziy's account, immediately and preemptively rebutted the traditional Muslim response he anticipated that Islam honors women because the Quran dedicates a whole chapter on women (i.e. inclusion equals honoring). Specifically, Athanasius notes the irony that this chapter actually dishonors women: Many verses directly encourage physical assault against women, legalize gender-based inequality of inheritance, disallow women's testimony in court, and legitimize polygamy. Athanasius's preemptive rebuttal signals several key points: (a) It demonstrates the typical structure of the action of discrediting Islamic teachings and Muslims' mainstream responses to such attacks, it illustrates the existence of a community wherein reactions or norms are identifiable; (b) it reveals the outcome of Islam's encouragement that laypeople only recite and memorize the Quran rather than carefully examine it: namely, that Muslims simply repeat what they have been taught since infancy rather than read and think about the Quran; and (c) it indirectly invites deeper debate by neutralizing traditional responses. In short, Athanasius's rebuttal represents a call from Ex-Muslims to the Muslim community to think for one's self, so as to move forward to more civil societies. This call is indirectly echoed in mediated action (2), shared as a meme by Ziy and many others in the Ex-Muslim community.

## Islam Honors Women – Discredit from Quran

DISCREDIT

WAKE UP

وَاضْرِبُوهُنَّ

الحرب هنا يقصد به التدليك  
والكلام العلم من التدليك علاج السرطان

"And beat them"

Beating here is intended to mean to tickle them. And science has proven that tickling cures cancer

PRE-EMPTIVE DISCREDIT

### Mediated action 3: And beat them

To discredit the Islamic authoritative discourse that Islam honors women, in the above meme the most problematic verse in the Quran is cited: *And beat them*. This controversial order appears in the the Quranic chapter on women, referenced in the previous example, as a last resort to treat a disobeying wife: *Do not engage them, withhold sex, and when all fails, beat them*. Several discursive and visual factors in the meme are at work to move forward the discourse on women and violence in Islam. On top, the image of a battered woman, referencing the discourse on domestic violence, is accompanied with the imperative from the Quran (*And beat them*). A second imperative, Wake up, is perched atop the verse, referencing an international activist movement that uses the *anonymous* mask as its logo (it is simultaneously an imperative to Muslims to wake up). The verbal

part of the meme is terse (the author of the meme does not indicate directly the Quranic source of the verse; its status as authoritative however is indicated by the vocalization used only in formal or Quranic language). The effect created by the verbal and visual strategies is disturbance heightened by the dark background (and the grim, direct, penetrating gaze, in addition to the size of the bruise). Similar to the rebuttal Athanasius provided in mediated action 1, the bottom image is a preemptive discrediting strategy of the two typical responses Muslims present when confronted with this (or other) problematic command(s) from the Quran: citing semantics and Western science. Instead of *waking up* by facing the connection between Quranic teachings and domestic violence in the Muslim community, Muslims typically argue that in the particular verse, *beating* does not mean physical assault but rather something else (e.g. abandon them [which does not work as *abandon them* [do not engage them] in the treatment plan is listed as the first resort; beat them sometimes is modified with *lightly* (beat them lightly). To ridicule the typical responses, *abandon them* and *beat them lightly* are replaced with *tickle them* in the constructed dialogue by a pseudo Western male scientist wearing a white robe and glasses (signaling [fake] authority); the absurdness of the response is further heightened by adding an absurd statement that *tickling has proven to cure cancer*. The absurdness of the anticipated response (and the fakeness of the strategy to resort to pseudo science) are also signaled by the sheepish smile on the white male face (and the way the glasses are held) in contrast to the grim, leveled gaze of the battered woman. The indirect illocutionary force is a request to “cut the crap and deal with this verse and domestic violence.”

In mediated action (4), the second most authoritative discourse in Islam, the hadiths (prophetic traditions documented in the book of Al-Bukhari and Muslim) are discredited, and more evidence of Islam’s dishonoring of women is provided. The discredit draws upon various intertextual references (Bakhtin, 1981), including international events, powerful women and humor. This third example made the rounds following Angela Merkel’s 2017 fourth-term win as the Vice Chancellor of Germany. (Ex-Muslims often cite the German leader to refute the saying, “No nation will thrive if led by a woman,” one of the most famous hadiths used to prevent women from leadership.) Because this meme was shared with no comments, I saved it as photo instead of a tweet.



## Islam Honors Women – Discredit from Hadith



(لن يفلح قوم ولو امرهم إمرأة)  
رواه البخاري

امامك ثلاث خيارات:  
1- إما تُكذِّب البخاري  
2- أو تدَّعي أن ألمانيا دولة فاشلة  
3- أو تحلف عالمصحف بأن أنجيلا  
ميركل رجل.

(No nation will thrive if led by a woman)  
Reported in Al-Bukhari

You have 3 choices:

1. Either you discredit Al-Bukhari
2. Or you claim that Germany is a failed nation
3. Or you swear on the Quran that Angela Merkel is in fact a man.

### Mediated action 4: Do hadiths honor women?

To counter the cultural authoritative discourse that women are unfit for leadership, and also to illustrate Islam's dishonoring of women, the meme juxtaposes the degrading hadith (placed in center) with a powerful photo (on top) taken following Angela Merkel's fourth-term win. The hadith is listed with no reference to the prophet (since it is an ubiquitous cultural discourse), although its authority is signaled by listing the source as Al-Bukhari. Given the proof that women can and do lead nations to prosperity, Muslims are presented with three options at the lower bottom. Although the first option is to admit that the reported sayings of the prophet are false, the remaining two offer a way to avoid this potential embarrassment: either claim that Germany is a failed nation or swear on the holy book that Angela Merkel is, in fact, a man. Reverting to humor also helped construct the mediated action as less threatening. Many Muslims commented on the meme, and most, in good humor, chose the last option. (Notably, the hadiths are less authoritative than the Quran and this particular hadith has been discredited for years. Moreover, although there are no female heads of state in Arab countries, many women do hold high positions.) The same hadith is also often lexically repaired on Twitter as mediated action 5 illustrates (the authoritative hadith *no nation will thrive if led by a woman* is lexically replaced with *no nation will thrive if it believes in such sayings*). Lexical repair of authoritative texts in fact

is one of the most prominent linguistic strategies Ex-Muslims use to discredit Islamic authoritative texts (for details on linguistic and multimodal repair in the Ex-Muslim community, see Al Zidjaly, 2019b).

## Islam Honors Women – Discredit from Hadith



### Mediated action 5: women and leadership

The above four examples are representative of the main actions and one participation framework of Ex-Muslim community tweets that discredit Islamic authoritative discourses by intertextually referencing various texts from the Quran and hadiths. The examples also highlight the typical structure of the actions that have created and maintained the community by circulating ideas (see Figure 6).



Mediated action 6: The structure of discredits

The identified structure of the tweets and memes created and shared in the Ex-Muslim community is as follows: While full citation of authoritative texts is not provided, their authority is indicated through vocalization (mediated actions 3 and 5) and the use of decadent layout and colored fonts (mediated action 5), which intertextually references the typical layout of the Quran (this was used in mediated action 5 to signal authority even though the text was a hadith, not a verse from the Quran). Through rebellious images that strengthen tweets, lexical repair of texts, and preemptive discrediting strategies (often appearing at the bottom), the actions both provoke and ridicule anticipated responses that signal Muslims' lack of knowledge about their religion and the erroneousness of certain beliefs. Although religion is engrained in everyday practices, Muslims rarely demonstrate knowledge of the history or books of Islam: They often fail to produce new thoughts and, thus, lose debates with the Ex-Muslims. Therefore, most tweets construct Ex-Muslims as logical, factual and knowledgeable (often appear to wear spectacles in memes), while most Muslims are constructed as lacking in these. Many Muslims have confessed on a popular 2018 hashtag #WhyILeftIslam that these actions by Ex-Muslims have catalyzed social change. One popular meme that has circulated on Arabic Twitter for years shows (in its most popular version) a debate between an animated (signaling the act of thinking) Christopher Hitchens, renown atheist, and an inanimate (signaling stagnation) Muslim. Hitchens asks the Muslim: *How do you know God exists?* The Muslim responds: *The Quran says so.* Hitchens rebuts: *How do you know the Quran is the word of God?* The Muslim responds: *Because God has said so.* Many have reportedly felt the impact of repeatedly witnessing the construction of this Catch 22 on Twitter. In response, most followers have investigated the authoritative discourses for themselves (as my students have done) rather than relying on ready-made adages. This action has shifted many followers' perceptions and practices (including my students), as I next demonstrate.

#### **4.2.2 Religiously coming out in Arabia**

A rising shift in consciousness and daily practices has taken place in Arabia. While one could argue this has been long in coming, credit for its quick physical manifestation goes to Ex-Muslims' mediated actions on social media (especially Twitter). These transformative actions could be summarized in three types: (a) constant, systematic discrediting actions of all Islamic authoritative discourses (the Quran, hadiths, beliefs, sayings, practices, policies); (b) co-construction of Muslims through numerous debates as illogical puppets devoid of knowledge of Islamic source texts and lacking humanity) and (c) provision of facts and online access to banned books and videos of past reformers. Not only have these combined actions prompted many to question (albeit covertly) their beliefs, they also result in shifts in identity that have dire consequences in the Arabian Gulf, as religion is deeply woven into both daily practices and governments. To counteract these threatening changes, the Friday sermons in Arabia, for the first time in history, openly addressed the question of atheism (and sparked intense debates on Twitter), as the Islamic pontiff of Oman in 2018 denounced atheists and those who leave Islam as mentally ill. In 2018, the Saudi Arabian government equated atheism to terrorism. Most alarmingly are the impacts on Muslims' identities. As argued by Ex-Muslims and illustrated in my data, a Muslim person is Muslim first and human second. In other words, Islam is not merely a part of Muslim Arab identity—it is their identity. Therefore, a change in religion equals a drastic change in core

identity. As my findings illustrate, the actions on Twitter have engendered intense identity crises among Muslims in the Arabian Gulf who experience shifts in consciousness but absent opportunities for their physical manifestation, given that such explorations remain legally punishable off-Twitter. Thus, they must remain in the closet of Islam or face imprisonment or death. Mediated action 7, a tweet of a private direct message to Athanasius from one of his silent followers, demonstrates this identity crisis. In it, the follower from Saudi Arabia admits to the perils of not being able to come out as Ex-Muslim, which echoes the reality of many in the Arabian Gulf.

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**ATHANASIUS:** I read your words many times and tried to be in your shoes. A very uncomfortable feeling for me. If your work is not related to religion, you are lucky (even though in our societies, religion is every where). You can hold on to the least amount of cheating because being completely ostracized in our society will be painful. If you were not with them, then it would have been easier.

Response

I recently became agnostic after deep contemplation, research and conviction. The problem is that I am a teacher; I therefore, started having two personalities. At first I was Quranic and rejected all strict hadiths and convinced my students to do so too. Now I am lost. I avoid intellectual discussions with them for fear I might slip. I am very popular in the school. I am the no. 1 teacher and very influential, not only in intellectual and religious matters but also in moralistic and psychological matters. I don't want to lose my influence on them; however, I feel as though I am cheating them, because if they were to know my stance, they would refuse to say hello to me. It's not easy for one to leave their religion .. What would you do if you were in my shoes?

Confession

### Mediated Action 7: Shift in identity

Mediated action 7 illustrates a typical interaction order in the Ex-Muslim community, wherein silent covert principals (lurkers) send DMs (private messages) to key community



leaders in which they demonstrate the occurrence of shifts and consequent struggle. Athanasius tweeted the DM to share with his followers. He maintained the female follower's confidentiality (a common community practice). In the private confession, the female follower shared her struggles of living a double life because of her agnosticism, as she had to continue performing Islamic acts she no longer believed in or face severe punishment from her family and/or government. In the confession, the principal follower additionally summarizes the pains to do her job as a school teacher, as she believed her new stance (as she refers to it) likely would result in ostracism by her students and potential job loss. She faces the choice to cheat herself (thus continuing her job of shaping her students), or live her truth and face consequences (including loss of access to her students). Athanasius responds by acknowledging the problem and advises her to cheat (live a lie), unless she were willing to leave the country and people. His response acknowledges the penetration of religion in daily life. This example is representative of many anonymous confessions on the popular 2018 #WhyIleftIslam and many retweets of private messages sent to community leaders. The adaptation of a forbidden identity covertly, as the groundwork has not been laid out yet, is documented in the 2017 book *Arabs without God*, written by a Western journalist. It is further exemplified by many of my students, both male and female. Male Arabs find the shift particularly hard, as they are expected to publicly perform daily acts of prayers they no longer believe in. The evident dissonance between many Muslims' beliefs and practices signals an historic era of Arabic governments inability to contain human agency and choice, due to social media's effects. The very fabric of society is being transformed covertly, as increasing numbers of people are leaving their religion in a society that does not allow such acts.

### **4.3 Changing the nexus of practice**

An MDNA project instructs that researchers must examine their own actions and histories in the course of conducting the project. Thus, I report my experiences analyzing the actions of the Ex-Muslim community and showcase how MDNA has informed my research regarding contentions brought about by social media's integration into daily activities. I argue that these contentions—in addition to ideologies (Crispin and Thurlow, 2011) and ethics (Georgekapulous and Spilioti, 2016)—should be incorporated into the next wave of digital discourse research.

This project brought to my attention the risks involved in undertaking, presenting and publishing socially active research. After my first and only presentation of this paper in GURT 2018 (Georgetown University RoundTable), my non-Arab academic colleagues asked me to halt my research out of fear for my personal and academic safety (i.e. I might be perceived as a principal and animator of the prohibited actions presented), while my Arab academic colleagues asked me to stop in order to save cultural face (i.e. do not air *our* Arab dirty laundry [i.e. what Arabs do online] for the whole world to see). Akin to risks involved in journalists reporting from war zones, I was alerted that researchers face risks when examining religious and political activism in contexts where democratic discourses, civil liberties and research ideologies are not foundationally laid. The project consequently has affected my decision as to what kind of researcher I would like to become. I have realized that conducting research is activism because reporting, analyzing and documenting

gives voice to the select group or community under scrutiny. Even selecting a research topic is a form of activism that has ramifications for academic careers, choices of methodology, and ethics. I also have developed appreciation for my acquisition of a huge data set that holds the key to practical and theoretical sociolinguistic contentions, including Arab identity as constructed by Arabs themselves (We finally have access to *the Arab mind* [Patai, 2010] in their own words). Concerns that I might be seen as a principal or animator of the actions I have been capturing and, at times, engaging in (especially at the onset of the project) has informed my decision both to lurk and to be mindful about the data I showcase and papers I write. For example, this paper is a methodological paper first and a linguistic examination of the nature of the dangerous actions the community involves in, second. Moreover, from the thousands of tweets that discredit the Quran, I presented first a mild one (Figure 2) and then a slightly problematic one (mediated action 3). I describe the example in Figure 3 as *slightly* problematic even though it is a discredit of a Quranic text, and indirectly a discredit of the Quran itself, because: 1) this particular verse or command has been deemed problematic for decades; as a result, it is widely discussed among Muslims; 2) the meme does not directly show the Quran; one could say the Quran is indirectly evoked. Therefore, both examples (due to layout and theme of women) are not as face-threatening as other content. That is, tackling the question of Islam and women is of limited threat, given the ubiquity of this topic among Muslims and the admission of many Muslims of the problematic nature of some of the verses in the Quran regarding women. My concerns also influenced my offline actions: I have ceased writing for local newspapers pending my own continued examination and contemplation of my culture and religion.

My decisions were proved right in 2018 when Arabian Gulf governments started seeing discrediting actions online as threats to national security. Consequently, laws prohibiting such actions were passed, leading to the imprisonment of a couple of key leaders in the Ex-Muslim community and suspension of a few Twitter accounts because they were reported as offensive to Islam. Some key members of the Ex-Muslim community consequently stopped activity temporarily or permanently. In 2018, the European parliament and Twitter showed signs of succumbing to the blasphemy laws of Pakistan.

Ethically, I was alerted that researching and publishing this topic might harm the Islamic reform movement by bringing attention to it—for example, the attention might lead to the closing of all accounts under the law of insulting religions. Others argued that giving the community voice through research may backfire, as direct attacks on Islamic authoritative discourses may be an unlikely path to freedom (Ex-Muslims disagree with this position). I was further alarmed that featuring key community members in my paper may actually harm them. For example, although I informed Athanasius of my project, I was apprehensive about featuring him because, despite anonymity, Saudi authorities could easily locate his IPA if they wished. I suspect, however, that he no longer resides in Saudi Arabia (neither does Ziy); and both tweet only intermittingly as their mission in inspiring change has been relatively accomplished. These ethical and accountability factors shaped the frame of this paper and will shape my future projects until I arrive at a firm position. In the meantime, I continue gathering data and highlighting the lived experience of doing such projects. My hope is to background the actions of the group and instead highlight the need to examine what people do online through social media and how this relates to human agency,

especially in under-studied contexts. I do so through adopting an integrative approach that theorizes actions as mediated by people, mediational means and larger discourses, with a focus on documentation instead of advocacy. This is my activist stance as an academic intrigued by activism research.

## **5. Why a nexus approach to digital activism?**

Social media have provided researchers with opportunities to witness identity formation and social change from the bottom up, leading to new data previously unavailable (KhosraviNik, 2016). To counter the influx and adequately handle the new research opportunities, Angouri (2016) rightly suggests writing bottom-up research on the lived experience of conducting social media research, while highlighting ethical and ideological concerns (Thurlow and Crispin, 2011; Georgakopoulou, 2017). To these discourses I add the need to include the experiences of under-studied communities, including users of social media in the Middle East, as it is in dire contexts with little to no freedom that people and their creativity thrive. Therefore, I suggest key to *reimagining* sociolinguistics (Blommaert 2018a, 2019) as a theory relevant to increasingly complex everyday lives is a theorization of activism as a nexus analysis. By highlighting the actions of social media users; and theorizing them as strategic (to bring about cultural revolution), mediated (by Arabs [with their interaction orders] and Twitter [with their combined uses]), and grounded in a dialectic, mutually constitutive, and mutually constraining relationship with various factors, including social actors, mediational means, cycles discourses, and their combined relationships with each and with their histories; I was able to accomplish several aims.

I was able to document the agency of Arab social media users as, over a decade, they took consistent strategic efforts to ignite change through creative actions often mixed with humor. In addition to capturing what they do online (Baym, 2015), by widening the lens of analysis and conducting ethnography (with a focus on methodological interdiscursivity), I was able to catch the ramifications of some of the actions in the Ex-Muslim community. In short, I captured the voice of a growing community of Ex-Muslims and other active Arab social media users, documented historic actions that may contribute to how social change manifests and outlined the role of technology in the process. Specifically, I noted the subtle changes that took root from both previous reform actions and online actions. Keeping a log of the actions Arabs took on the Internet from the inception of technology was critical to detecting these shifts and documenting the evolution of Arabs' agency over time. This longitudinal approach enabled me understand the links between actions and capture the historic transformation of the very fabric of Arab societies. Had I not conducted a nexus analysis approach to Arab activism, I would have gravely underestimated the actions of the Ex-Muslim community and the role they play in the lives of millions of people. Had I not grounded their actions in relevant discourses, I also would have erroneously theorized the actions of my students (and others), perhaps attributing their struggles to mental illness, as postulated by the Omani clerks. Without theorizing activism as a form on nexus analysis, a very skewed picture of what is happening in Arabia would have emerged.

Notwithstanding concerns with longitudinal, ethnographic research (Erickson, 2004), theorizing digital activism as nexus analysis also cements the value in conducting



ethnographic, integrative and longitudinal research. In 2010, a discourse analysis of Arabs' posts on the Al Jazeera news agency website enabled me to correctly predict the Arab Spring that came to be known as the Facebook Revolution (see Author 2012). My current nexus analysis project has enabled me to predict a Twitter Revolution with far more drastic consequences for Arabs (and the world in general).

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