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Ikhwan Web: Digital Activism and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood

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Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD in Media and Film
Studies

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Declaration for PhD thesis

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ABSTRACT

The research focuses on the practices of digital activism and political communication of the Muslim Brotherhood, examining a selection of media outlets established by the group before the 25 January revolution. In doing so, it attempts to answer the following research questions: what is the political role of digital technologies? How is one to conceive of the role they play in relation to contemporary social movements?

The thesis argues that the political role of new media is to be found in their capacity to store information. Far from merely making claims to authorities or expressing identities, social movements produce knowledges about the territories they inhabit. What new media provide social movements with is the capacity to assemble digital archives, which in turn enable them to organize and produce knowledge. By going online, social movements create archives of their own history, read against the grain others' archives or remember what was arbitrarily removed from them. For keeping memory is never an innocent act, but always an exquisitely political one.

Having positioned the theoretical argument in relation to both social movement and new media studies, I will then proceed to apply it to three cases of study. Two chapters will examine and compare the official websites of the Muslim Brotherhood - one in English, the other in Arabic. The last chapter focuses instead on the development of an Ikhwan-related blogosphere. The research argues that the adoption of new media was both beneficial and detrimental to the organization. Digital technologies did help the group in circumventing the obstacles imposed by the regime, yet they equally enabled internally marginalized subjects, such as the youth, to intervene in decision-making processes and pierce the ideological veil of unity and cohesion.

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Introduction

At the time of writing, the fifth and current President of Egypt has recently taken part to the 16th summit of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), held in Tehran from 26 to 31 August 2012. There, he delivered a speech that surely caught off guard the majority of his audience. Displaying confidence and reclaiming a major international role for his country, Morsi would declare Egypt's unconditional support to both the cause of Palestine and the plight of Syrian population against Bashar el Asad's oppressive regime, define the UN Security Council an “overt dictatorship” and then move to affirm the new course of Egypt:

We meet today at one of the most important moments in contemporary history, in the aftermath of the Egyptian peaceful Revolution that has, in fact, started a number of years ago, and materialized only on January 25, 2011, when Egyptians united to topple a despotic regime that never reflected the interests of its own people. The Egyptian Revolution has succeeded in achieving its political objectives. Now, political power has been finally transferred to a truly civilian government, elected by the Egyptians without any foreign interference. Egypt has now become a national, constitutional, democratic, modern state.

(Morsi 2012)

Indeed, with the 51.73% of the vote obtained in the May-June 2012 Presidential Elections, Mohamed Morsi is the first civilian to be elected as President of the Republic in the history of his country. Morsi is a long-time member of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), Egypt's best organized Islamist group and without any doubt the most influential one in the long and complex history of political Islam, within and beyond the confines of the Middle East.

His election was met with a mixture of fear and expectation by commentators and pundits of the mainstream media. To some, the victory of the Muslim Brotherhood “closed a circle” which brought the country back to “that tumultuous time, six decades ago, when the military officers overthrew the monarchy in 1952 and announced the birth of a new order” (Ajami 2012). To the sceptics' eyes, Morsi's participation to the NAM summit was just wrong, a “wrong turn” (Friedman 2012), said the “imperial messenger” (Fernández 2011). Liberal circles seemed more inclined to give him a chance, whether for a genuine democratic posture or for purely strategic reasons (Al-Rashed 2012; Michaels 2012).

Founded by Hasan al Banna in 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood rapidly established a deeply-rooted network of institutions and facilities providing social services, education and recreational

activities. Having sided with the Free Officers, they would later be banned by Gamal Abdel Nasser. Nearly twenty years of harsh repression, detention and tortures followed from Nasser's ban. With Anwar Sadat in power, the Muslim Brotherhood resumed their political activities and started practicing a reformist, gradualist approach to politics. This vision translated into a period of intense activism and mobilization within students unions and professional associations. While formally remaining an “illegal organization”, this political strategy would soon produce its fruits. The '84 and '87 elections, saw them winning respectively 8 and 30 seats, thanks to electoral alliance with the New Wafd Party first, and the Labour Party later (Fahmy 2002: 84). The impressive performance of the MB in the political field reached its apex in the 2005 elections, when a parliamentary bloc formed by MB independent candidates won 88 seats, thus becoming the largest opposition group in parliament.

Parallel to the political trajectory of the Muslim Brotherhood, corporate media would soon take a strong interest in their ability and willingness to engage with digital technologies. To be sure, the interest on Ikhwan media initiatives was the most recent topic in line with a well-established media hype around digital technologies. It first started with the internet and then proceeded with blogging, Facebook and Twitter. Each one of these new technologies were said to have the taumaturgical potential to bring democracy (overseas) or improve it (in the “West”). One first witnessed the rise of what early pioneers defined the “internet super highway” (see Dyer-Witthford 1999: 15-37). Then it came the “newest media revolution” of blogging, which according to some, would have radically changed “politics, business, and culture” (Kline et al. 2005).

The Middle East, in this respect, was no exception. In Egypt, since early 2000s a loose coalition of groups, movements and associations named *Kefaya* (Enough) was challenging the tight societal and political control imposed by the Egyptian state authorities. A growing number of people used blogging and social networks to recount, discuss and organize protest activities. While being pioneers of the Egyptian cyberspace, the Muslim Brotherhood somehow lagged behind in the blogosphere. Shortly after their electoral exploit in 2005, media practitioners and political analysts discovered a thriving blogosphere constituted by self-defined Islamist bloggers, either sympathetic or officially associated with the Ikhwan. Just like for the political victories of the Brothers, their engagement with new technologies was regarded mainly regarded with suspicion (Morozov 2010; Herrera and Lotfy 2012), yet some voices were much more supportive (Lynch 2005; 2007).

What is the political role of digital technologies? Do they have some kind of political effect? And if so, what kind of a political effect is that? How can one think of it? Why and how can media have political implications? How is one to conceive of the role they play in relation to contemporary social movements? The present research project is an attempt to tackle such

questions, and it does so by taking into exam the use of digital technologies within the political communication strategies and cultural production of the Egyptian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, focusing mainly on a timeframe that goes from 2000 to 2010, shortly before the revolution that toppled Hosni Mubarak. The research also attempts to formulate an original contribution, in both theoretical and methodological terms, to the study of digital technologies and the way in which contemporary social movements use them as tools for political communication.

From a theoretical point of view, the research argues that digital technologies should be understood and studied through the concept of archive. What contemporary social movements find and develop online is the possibility of assembling digital archives, through which they are then able to organize, articulate and communicate the knowledge, discourses and culture. Consider the now endless list of highly representative examples of digital activism. From St. Paul's Church through Piazza S. Giovanni to Midān Taḥrīr and Dawwār al-lu'lu', from Syntagma square through Puerta del Sol to Zuccotti Park, a complex topology of social struggles is now emerging and consolidating. In this process, new media are surely playing a key role. Although the outcomes are often ambivalent and contradictory, one cannot deny that the internet is one of the main channels through which these struggles travel, proliferate, are appropriated and/or receive demonstrations of solidarity from abroad.

Indeed, contemporary social movements engagement with new media is not unusual, as the latter are part of a broader, pervasive process of economic, societal and political change. Vast amounts of multimedia content are produced, distributed and consumed for virtually every kind of purpose: from mass entertainment to pornography, from cultural events to political activities. While the 'flux' metaphor may at first seem appropriate, it should be noted that information does not just endlessly circulate but is, instead, constantly retained in order to be re-produced and re-used. One does not simply send an email or a text message, share a link on Facebook or read a newspaper without leaving a record of this action behind.

Under this light, then, digital technologies offer not so much the capacity to establish real-time connections in a horizontal and non-linear way, as a set of techniques and machines to store, process and distribute information. The database, as Poster put it, becomes one of the paradigmatic figures of the new "mode of information" (Poster 1990). However, in such a neutral, instrumentalist definition something is missing. What renders truly political the use of digital technologies is a drive to make public something that is not, to tell the untold and remember the forgotten. What is deployed as a political weapon by contemporary social is the capacity of new media to record information.

Rather than the database, I argue that the concept of archive is better equipped to describe the

relationship between new media and contemporary technologies. Far from merely making claims to authorities or expressing identities, social movements produce knowledges about the territories they inhabit. In this respect, the cultivation of digital archives has profound and fundamental political implications. By going online, social movements create archives of their own history, they read against the grain the archives of other institutions or remember what was arbitrarily removed from them. For keeping memory is never an innocent act, but an exquisitely political one.

However, the use of such a concept requires different theoretical and methodological perspectives. To begin with, this study distantiates itself from frameworks and accounts according primacy to the analysis of meaning and is more inclined towards materialist readings of digital technologies, regarding them as digital artifacts whose analysis exceeds the concerns and questions of hermeneutics. As a consequence, such a theoretical move will necessarily have implications on the methodological level. In this respect, the present research could be regarded as a historical, archeological, or *archival* approach to the study of cyberculture. In other words, websites and blogs are here taken as cultural objects, digital artifacts endowed with a material existence that needs to be included in their analysis.

However, in order to do so, it is necessary to carefully position such argument within existing theories, disciplinary frameworks as well as popular and academic debates. In this regard, the task I am confronted with is daunting, not only because of the magnitudo of the proposed object of study, which will be nonetheless limited, but also in terms of the broad interdisciplinary approach that it elicits. To further clarify this point, it could be said that the present research intends to locate itself within a space between social movement studies, critical cyberculture theory and postcolonial studies. The first two fields of research will be predominant, yet I shall resort to the insights and reflections of postcolonial theorists.

The rationale behind this move is not a mere academic exercise. It is also political. Many scholars are now suggesting the establishment of a disciplinary area specifically concerned with the study of Arab media. While some opt for placing their arguments within the tradition of political communication (Hafez 2008), others are trying to reformulate this project in light of the British tradition of media and cultural studies (Sabry 2010; 2011). In agreement with Hafez, I also think that, although growing at an impressive pace, such a discipline is still in “its infancy” and in need of building further its theoretical and conceptual toolbox (2008: 9). While sharing these concerns, I nonetheless propose to take a different path, and articulate what could be defined as a materialist reading of contemporary Arab cyberculture.

In the process I also provide a political analysis of the ways in which the Muslim Brotherhood has engaged with digital technologies. Rather than considering this engagement as the

work of blind militants or that of opportunist public relations managers, I would put emphasis on the contradictory and ambivalent outcomes and effects such an engagement has prompted. Just like in any other nation-state, digital technologies did provide an alternative platform for marginalized political groupings, but it also engendered new tensions and struggles. The blogosphere, in other words, is yet another battlefield where social relations are forged as well as rescinded, contested as well as negotiated. In this respect, the Muslim Brotherhood is no exception. While the use of blogging as an advocacy tool, or the capacity to establish an institutional media channel might be said to be highly beneficial for the perception of the movement, the same tools allowed a diverse range of subjectivities to emerge and contest both the hegemonic claims and the hierarchical organization of the movement.

It is important to note that the thesis attempts to build a critical argument about the ideological use of Islam made by the Muslim Brotherhood. But it does so exploring a third path, one that would be capable of moving beyond the overt racism of Islamophobic and neo-Orientalist discourses, on the one hand, and the endless exercises of deconstructionism on the other, devised as a tactic of resistance by liberal and progressive sectors of academia in order to counteract the cultural essentialist arguments put forward by neocons as well as Islamists. To remove ourselves from this deadlock by repeatedly showing that culture and identities are socially constructed is, in my view, an insufficient and self-defeating strategy. The field, conditions and terms of discourse remain basically unchallenged, leaving culture as a distinct domain from economy and politics (see Mitchell 2002). It is for this reason that the broader interdisciplinary area called Middle East Studies was largely caught off guard by the Arab uprisings (see *Jadaliyya Reports* 2011), very much like British economists reacted to the 2008 financial crisis: they didn't see it coming (Pierce 2008). In order to move beyond this impasse, it is fundamental to exit the culturalist niche over which both conservative and liberal scholarship has been fighting to assert their epistemological control, and re-address issues such as cultural production and social movements from a completely different perspective, putting back into the picture questions of power relations and authority, exploitation and exclusion, and modes of subjectivation and resistance.

Methodology

This research project aims to elaborate an original contribution to the study of contemporary digital technologies and the regimes of cultural production they engender. As such, it is highly experimental and surely will be incomplete, exposed to any kind of critiques and revision. But since I take it to be a departure rather than an arrival point, these risks are to be conceived of as intrinsic

to such an endeavour. In fact, it could be possible to say from the start that it barely scratches the surfaces of what has thus far been put in place by the Muslim Brotherhood. It is also possible to envision a further development that would incorporate, besides the obvious and well accepted critical remarks, their most recent media initiatives which tend to be more concentrated on visual culture and acquiring more visibility on Facebook and similar social networking sites.

A quick disclaimer is in order here. Throughout the active research period I repeatedly tried to contact the members of the Ikhwan included in this thesis, yet these attempts were not successful. I conducted semi-structured interviews via email but had to remove the real name of the interviewee since I was unable to get his/her permission to include it in this study. In addition to this, time, health and financial constraints must be taken into account. Being a self-funded precarious worker -employed as a waiter by Sodexo and occasional Teaching Assistant- and having to complete a PhD programme in only 48 months is something I would not wish to my worst enemy.

Let me now discuss some of the methodological choices informing the present research. As I mentioned earlier on, the concept of archive is here adopted as the main theoretical concept through which the study of new media is to be framed. Such a concept is not the only one being used, but will rather be inserted into a conceptual toolbox largely informed by critical approaches to the analysis of social movements and new media. This choice is motivated by both theoretical and methodological concerns. Within the field of media studies, it is now possible to identify a specific subdiscipline concerning itself with the formulation of a critical perspective on new media and their usage in cultural production as well as political communication. In the past two decades, scholars interested in the study of digital technologies have elaborated a conceptual vocabulary specifically concerned with and derived from the distinctive features of digital technologies. Terms such as information, interface and network, for instance, have been articulated as theoretical concepts for a critical theory of new technologies. That of archive is one of such concepts that passed from being a mere technical word to become a viable analytical concept (see Gane and Beer 2008; Manoff 2004).

However, the rationale behind this choice is also dictated by both observation of and practice¹ with digital technologies and the ways in which they are put to use for political purposes. The archive, in my view, is best equipped to render the political significance of practices of digital activism. Members and sympathizers of social movements often find themselves marginalized by mainstream corporate media. Their discourses and arguments are often either ridiculed, dismissed, ignored or removed altogether. This is something that started to change with the advent of new technologies. By opening small websites and weblogs contemporary social movements were not

¹ The present writer is himself a blogger and has been involved in several online media projects.

only able to enter the media ecology dominated by corporate giants, thus forcing them to take into account others' opinions or be exposed as biased; they are also capable of building alliances and thus further develop their arguments and expand their reach.

These dynamics generate often long and dispersive online discussions that need to be followed throughout their unfolding. It is in this sense that I find useful to shift from a concern with real-time interaction to the historical development of discussions and arguments. When one is confronted with a specific argument put forward in a website or a small blog, the author often refers to other discussions and writings published elsewhere and in another time. Online discussions, in other words, develop and unfold throughout weeks, months and even years. They have a fundamentally material mode of existence which cannot be overlooked. If one is to study them, then, from this perspective the research becomes closer to historical and archaeological investigation than hermeneutical concerns with meanings. For rather than being concentrated in a short period of time, they instead unfold in a much longer timeframe. What is more online discussions and networks are made of traces, threads developed and scattered online. Scattered here is a particularly adequate word. For, once again, rather than being concentrated in one particular platform, or website, or weblog, these traces are instead distributed in a variety of outlets.

In addition to the historical approach, so to speak, to the study of new media, one should also add the such an endeavour often takes the form of an attempt to map out complex sets of connections, to reconstruct what in my view should be called a *topology*. In this regard, I find useful to oppose the latter term to that of topography. As Johannes Fabian has argued, topography still points to an objectivist pretense to truly represent the territory being mapped, whereas topology discursively situates itself within that territory (Fabian 2007: 45-51). In other words, a topology always *performs* a specific discourse over the territory, and it thus does not pretend to represent it in its entirety or truth.

From a theoretical point of view, this move allows me to move away from the traditional vocabulary of cultural analytics. A culturally essentializing conception of community can be replaced by the concept of network and topologies, which are better equipped to capture not only the degrees of openness and closure inherent in any social grouping, but also the fact that they are in a constant process of becoming subjected to both constraints and opportunities. Likewise, the term identity can thus be replaced with that of subjectivity, which is not only capable of conveying the ways in which it is socially constructed but also the fact that this process is constantly immersed in power relations working within and through it. Corollary to this, one should also add that concepts such as culture and ideology, values and beliefs come to be seen not as abstractions in need to be either expressed or represented but as *embodied* and *performed* through practice and language.

Finally, once set along these lines, the political dimension of digital technologies becomes much closer to issues of memory and truth.

If combined with the observation of practices of digital activism, such an approach yields a completely different methodological outlook. When I first approached the Islamist segment of the Egyptian blogosphere I started following four or five weblogs. After few days, the field has already expanded into a vast assemblage of more than 30 weblogs, wikis, individual and collective profiles on social networking platforms such as Youtube, Facebook and Twitter, semi-official and institutional websites. The primary sources, then, mainly consists of blogposts of self-identified MB bloggers and pages of the two official websites of the Muslim Brotherhood.

I first started collecting the blogposts published by Abdel Moneim Mahmoud, a young MB blogger and activist. I concentrated on his blog after he was detained by state authorities and a number of Egyptian activists, including 'secular' and leftist bloggers such as Alaa Abdel Fattah and Hossam el-Hamalawy, started campaigning for his release. At the time (2007), I was already following the rise of the Egyptian blogosphere, in particular through the pages of leftist bloggers such as Hossam el-Hamalawy², Jano Charbel³, Malek X⁴ or Per Bjorklund⁵, while reading other bloggers such as Sarah Carr⁶, Baheyya⁷, Zeinobia⁸ and Sandmonkey⁹.

By keeping up to date with these and other weblogs, I followed Moneim Mahmoud's juridical ordeal. His blog acted as a window to the Ikhwan-related blogosphere, disclosing a topology of weblogs I was unaware of. Starting from the links listed on the sidebar of *Ana Ikhwan*¹⁰, I soon entered a tight network of MB bloggers such as Ibrahim al-Houdaiby¹¹, Abdelrahman Ayyash¹², Mustafa al-Naggar¹³, Magdi Saad¹⁴, Abdel Rahman Rashwan¹⁵, Islam Lotfi¹⁶ and others. In this respect, it is important to note that the analysis of a weblog should always look very carefully at the elements displayed on sidebars and headers. They will often consists of links, banners and pictures which might open up further lines of investigation or lead to discover new primary sources. For example, if a link to a specific weblog is displayed by many other similar

2 <http://www.arabawy.org/>

3 <http://she2i2.blogspot.co.uk/>

4 <http://malek-x.net/>

5 <http://scandegypt.blogspot.co.uk/>

6 <http://inanity.org/>

7 <http://baheyya.blogspot.co.uk/>

8 <http://egyptianchronicles.blogspot.co.uk/>

9 <http://sandmonkey.org>

10 <http://ana-ikhwan.blogspot.co.uk/>

11 <http://ihoudaiby.blogspot.com>

12 <http://al-ghareeb.blogspot.co.uk/>

13 <http://anam3ahom.blogspot.co.uk/>

14 <http://yallameshmohem.blogspot.co.uk/>

15 <http://ikhwanyouth.blogspot.co.uk/>

16 <http://kawakby.blogspot.co.uk/>

weblogs it might then be worth being visited and followed. This is precisely the process through which I discovered other MB bloggers, navigating from link to link while recording every passage, using RSS feeds for weblogs and Zotero for specific blogposts.

From a methodological point of view, one must bear in mind that this territory is constantly changing form and shape. Blogs, websites and accounts can be removed, erased, discontinued or even censored; the authors and owners of such online presences can develop other initiatives, become involved in other projects or simply leave the cyberspace forever. And the same applies to the content being produced, for it can be removed, erased, censored or simply published in other formats and platforms. To reiterate the point, digital activism and the media outlets through which it is performed do have a material life that cannot be left out of the analytical framework.

What this implies for the researcher is that if s/he does not capture and retain this fleeting and ephemeral material it could be permanently lost. It is at this point that theory and practice coincide. In order to be able to cope with this unstable object of study, one has to construct an archive of all this material. To do so, I used Zotero and began storing and classifying the material I was collecting. Zotero¹⁷ is an online research tool available for free both as an additional element for internet browsers, such as Firefox or Safari, and as a stand-alone application. It is normally used by academics to manage bibliographic references, but can be used to organize various research materials. In this case, I used it to organize the primary sources collected online. The material can be catalogued according to type (blogpost, webpage, discussion on an online forum, article of a webmagazine); it is possible to add links, notes, tags, intertextual connections. It is also possible to attach files and snapshots of the webpage in question. In addition to Zotero, there are other tools that can be used. To avoid the loss of information it is possible to retrieve page using websites such as Internet Archive¹⁸. This website has built a specific program, Wayback Machine¹⁹, which is freely available online and allows the user to retrieve webpages, articles, blogposts and all sorts of online material that has been removed from the internet.

It is important to note that the volume of this material often exceeds the capacities of a single researcher, and would thus be useful to first mechanize further actions of retrieval, capture, storage and classification, and then devise softwares and applications capable to perform both quantitative and qualitative analyses on big data. An interesting experiment moving in such direction is represented by R-Shief²⁰, which has recently provided a useful way to both analyze and present online discussions on Twitter²¹. Online tools such as R-Shief are particularly useful in

17 <http://www.zotero.org/>

18 <http://archive.org/>

19 <http://archive.org/web/web.php>

20 <http://www.r-shief.org/index.php#.UFR1ehjvk7A>

21 <http://twitterminer.r-shief.org/hq/>

occasion of major political events and occurrences, where online discussions often consists of huge amounts of data which can only be gathered, analyzed and presented through a work based on cooperation and mechanized actions.

From this point of view, then, the present research takes a rather different direction. Since I am unable to perform these kind of large-scale quantitative analysis, I opted to concentrate on developing a theoretical argument which could hopefully be translated in the future in a more systematic and coherent methodological approach. Broadly speaking, the main concern animating this reseach would be to focus on the power relations and tensions traversing and constituting the digital archives established by members of the Muslim Brotherhood. I shall give particular attention to social, historical and political events, trying to show how they are in fact the major drive behind the emergence of practices of digital activism. What follows will necessarily be an incomplete and revisable experiment, rather than a comprehensive account of the strategies and outlets of MB political communication. It is hoped that in the future there will be occasions to further adjust this framework.

Structure of the Thesis

The present research is divided into two parts, each of which consists of three chapters looking at specific topics. The first three chapters position the theoretical argument in relation to social movements and media studies and provide a historical background of the Muslim Bortherood, discussing relevant scholarship and putting the group's political trajectory in relation to the transformations brought about by neoliberalism. The last chapters selects three cases of study from media outlets established by the Muslim Brotherhood before the January 25 revolution. Each chapter will respectively focus on Ikhwanweb, the MB official website in English, Ikhwanonline, the MB official website in Arabic, and the emergence of an MB-related blogosphere.

Chapter one discusses the existing scholarship and debates relevant to the study of Islamist movements. Although it now has a rather long tradition, the genealogy of this area of research is quite complex and heterogeneous. At first squarely located within the Orientalist approach, it looked at political Islam through the analytical lenses provided by literary and religious studies, on the one hand, and political science on the other. Additional contributions come not only from anthropology but also from comparative politics and, more recently, social movement studies. It is to this body of knowledge that I first turn. I will begin by reviewing the western traditions and then see how these have influenced the way in which the study of Islamism was approached. Particular attention will be devoted to the scholarship of Asef Bayat (2010). I will concentrate on his concept

of social non-movements to critique it and opt for a theoretical move from which he distantiates: autonomist marxism. This is an inventive and rather heretical reading of Marx's oeuvre and, I shall argue, far richer and productive.

Chapter two further refines the theoretical argument, putting it in relation to existing scholarship and theoretical debates on new media in the Arab world. I will first outline the historical context in which the rise of new media in the Arab world took place. The Egyptian state appears to occupy the paradoxical position of creating the conditions for dissent to become more visible. On the one hand, the state produces policies and programs to boost the IT sector which, on the other hand, provide social movements with a communicational infrastructure. The Egyptian blogosphere, then, seems to be shaped by these contradictory dynamics. In order to address this phenomenon, the emerging discipline of Arab media studies opted for various analytical approaches. Just like social movement theory, media studies have a rather complicated genealogy, which shaped in various ways the study of Arab new media. Western traditions such as US political communication and British cultural studies have had a strong influence. Having reviewed the main theoretical approaches, I propose to include a perspective informed by autonomist marxism. This move will be further refined through the concept of archive, which will be employed to describe and study how contemporary movements do online politics. Though the concept has been initially developed within literary studies, it was soon adopted as a viable analytical tool in both postcolonial and media studies. In following this path, I shall try to conceive of it in a way that would open the space for a materialist reading of cyberculture and practices related to it.

Chapter three provides the historical background, reconstructing the history of the Muslim Brotherhood from its birth to contemporary era. Since the present work is not a historical one, it will be based on a rather linear account focused on the relationship between the Ikhwan and the various Egyptian regimes. While it may be simplistic to divide their history according to the succession of Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak it is however important to remember that these regimes had different relationships with the movement, and this helps us to explain more clearly some of their distinctive features. The chapter further argues that political Islam can be framed through the concept of the state of exception, as employed in the works of Agamben in particular. The latter has shown that the state of exception is both a technique of government and a source of authority routinely employed by nation-states (Agamben 1998). Rather than a Gramscian war of position leading to a post-Islamist turn, I argue that the political trajectory of political Islam should be first historicized and then read against the background of the neoliberal state of exception, acting as the main grid within which Islamism encountered neoliberal democracy.

Chapters four, five and six take a selection of three cases of study and analyze them through

the theoretical argument previously outlined. Chapter four examines Ikhwanweb, the official English website of the Muslim Brotherhood. This media outlet is particularly interesting because it can be conceived as the apex of Ikhwan hegemonic projection. Through Ikhwanweb the Muslim Brotherhood was not only able to assert its hegemonic claims at a regional and national level, but it also enabled it to engage in a dialogue with the “West”. Such an engagement, however, will result in often contradictory and ambivalent outcomes. Chapter five examines Ikhwanonline, the MB official website in Arabic, and then compares it with its Ikhwanweb. The former was launched two years before the English website and appears to be different on multiple levels. To begin with, the aesthetic choices reproduce many elements of the Islamic canon. Time and dates are indicated following both the Islamic and Gregorian calendars, as well as Mecca time and GMT, for example. The website also puts an emphasis on the concept of *da‘wah* which is absent from its counterpart in English. Chapter six will close the thesis by looking at a much more representative sample of Ikhwan media. I will focus in particular on MB bloggers, be they members or sympathizers of the Ikhwan. Inspired by Kefaya activists, young Islamists started using blogging as a tool of political communication. They established advocacy blogs to campaign against Mubarak repressive measures but also to articulate dissent with the group's leadership. While it is beyond doubt that their media initiatives did benefit the Ikhwan, the difference they brought to existence through blogging has proliferated and exploded in multiple directions. Even though many of them left the organization without achieving the change they proposed, this diffuse exodus actually undermines the MB hegemonic claims to represent One country, let alone One Islam, and puts the Muslim Brotherhood in a permanent crisis of representation.

Chapter 1

Social Movements: Theoretical Approaches and Recent Developments on Digital Technologies

The present chapter will review the main theoretical debates and approaches shaping the field of Social Movement Theory (SMT). While earlier accounts of collective action drew a direct, causal relationship, between socio-psychological strains and collective action, other paradigms such as Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT) challenged this perspective focusing instead on the mobilising structures and processes behind collective action. After the cycles of protests of the 1960s, however, social movements seemed to be characterized more by cultural elements. New Social Movements (NSM) focuses precisely on cultural and symbolic aspects of collective action and identity. These approaches will influence the study of social movements in the Middle East. Several scholars turned to SMT, with relational approaches being helpful to study the mobilizational capacities of Islamist movements. In this respect, an original contribution comes from Bayat, who regards the movements in the region as *nonmovements*.

However, I find his suggestion to be problematic. It seems that it reproduces what it is trying to overcome, while also obscuring existing approaches. This is the case with a concept Bayat conjures up, Hardt and Negri's multitude, as it opens to a research current which, in my view, might be worth being further explored. If one goes beyond Hardt and Negri's scholarship, it is possible to engage with an extremely diverse and heterogeneous tradition, that is currently re-interpreting Marx's insights in light of poststructuralist theories, working very closely with contemporary social movements and, even more importantly, theorizing along the way what could be a critical perspective on the relationship between social movements and new media. In no way is this an isolated attempt. In fact, a range of recent contributions points to a growing convergence of issues and concepts between social movements studies, new media theories and materialism. In this respect, the works of some autonomist authors are useful to elaborate a materialist analysis of cultural politics and contemporary social movements.

Social Movement Theory

How do people engage in collective action? What is a social movement? These are but few questions that have traditionally informed the field of social movement studies. Needless to say, as

the discipline evolved answers changed, new problematiques and approaches emerged. Earlier accounts of collective action regarded it as deriving from societal conflicts or conditions of psychological discomfort. The main of the “classic model”, as Wiktorowicz defines it, is that it “posit[s] a linear causal relationship in which structural strains produce psychological discomfort, which, in turn, produces collective action” (2004: 6). What is missing is an argument capable of explaining how and why it is possible to pass from a situation of psychological discomfort to an active engagement in collective action. Another problematic node is that collective action can take many different forms.

These questions would be addressed by recent developments in social movement studies which would concentrate their attention on the processes, structures and ideas behind collective action. One of these approaches is called Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT) and finds in Charles Tilly one of its most coherent formulations. Tilly's scholarship concentrates on the structures and processes through which social movements engage in collective action. His approach is also known as “political process” because the emphasis is “on the overall dynamics which determine social unrest and its characteristics, rather than on social movements as specific organised actors” (Diani in Nash 2000: 158). In *From Mobilization to Revolution*, he elaborates a framework to explain *how* people act towards shared goal and *why* such an action can take different forms. Such an understanding leads him to regard social movements not as given entities, but instead as products of complex interactions among existing forces, structures and actors:

A social movement is a sustained series of interactions between power holders and persons successfully claiming to speak on behalf of a constituency lacking formal representation, in the course of which those persons make publicly visible demands for changes in the distribution or exercise of power, and back those demands with public demonstrations of support.

(Tilly 1984: 306)

Following Tilly, other scholars developed analytical concepts to further specify not only the dynamics of collective action, but also the interactions occurring between the actors involved in it. One of these notions is called Political Opportunity Structures (POS)²². POS refers to the opportunities, or lack thereof, for social movements to access institutional channels and put forward their socio-political demands. The main argument is that the effectiveness of social movements and their actions is determined by the availability of and access to political channels capable to fulfill

22 Some scholars have argued that, although the paradigm of Political Opportunity Structures (POS) is usually regarded to be part of the political process paradigm (RMT), it actually falls beyond it. Wiktorowicz, for example, adopts a different definition, Opportunities and Constraints, to highlight the fact that “in practice [POS] encompass[es] cultural, social and economic factors as well” (2004: 14).

their demands. POS, as Gamson and Meyer put it, focuses on “the opening and closing of political space and its institutional and substantive location” (in McAdam *et al.* 1996: 277)²³.

However, the accounts working within this paradigm often focus on the description of structures and actors, thus conveying a sense of fixity and a lack of dynamism. To counter this structuralist bias, other scholars moved away from economic and political institutions and included concerns for cultural and symbolic aspects of collective action. Such a theoretical move was also dictated by a profound reconfiguration of the modes of contention and the identity of social movements. While prior movements identified according to class-based interests, those emerging from the 1960s to the 1990s put more emphasis on cultural traits. Factors such as gender, ethnicity and religious affiliation seemed to play a greater role.

In order to study what was increasingly regarded as a new form of social movement, some scholars turned their attention to issues and concepts of political communication and media studies. One of these was the concept of framing. Within social movement theory, framing refers to the process by which a particular group deploys different strategies, tools and sets of meanings to 'frame' their issues and demands. The concept of framing is used not only to study the interactions between political contestants and authorities, but also to describe the way in which movements interact with mainstream media and solve their inter/intra-organizational disputes. Framing, then, is a fundamentally contested process, where different groupings strive to achieve a hegemonic position²⁴.

A more systematic approach to the study of New Social Movements (NSM) has been formulated by Alberto Melucci. His main argument is that social movements have the capacity to create and mobilize shared identities and meanings. As Diani has aptly put it, while Tilly is concerned with the “visible” stage of the social movements, Melucci wants to investigate the processes prior to collective action, which are more related to the field of “cultural production” (Diani in Nash 2000: 159-60). From this perspective, processes of collective identity formation acquire analytical primacy, and this leads Melucci to arrive at a different definition of social movements:

Movements are not entities that move with the unity of goals attributed to them by ideologues. Movements are systems of action, complex networks among the different levels and meanings of social actions. Collective identity allowing them to become actors

23 For further reading on POS see also Della Porta *et al.* (2006), Diani (1996), Kurzman (1996), McAdam *et al.* (1996; 2001), Tarrow (1994).

24 On the concept of framing see Goffman (1974). For further reading on framing within political communication see Entman (1993), Gamson (1992) and Wolfsfeld (2011). For further reading on framing theory as applied within social movement theory see Benford and Snow (2000), Johnston and Klandermans (1995), Klandermans *et al.* (1988), Laraña *et al.* (1994).

is not a datum or an essence: it is the outcome of exchanges, negotiations, decisions, and conflicts among actors. Processes of mobilization, organizational forms, models of leadership, ideologies, and forms of communication - these are all meaningful levels of analysis for the reconstruction from the within of the action system that constitutes the collective actor.

(Melucci 1996: 4)

Melucci's definition introduces another theoretical concept borrowed from natural sciences and now increasingly applied within social sciences. I am here referring to the concept of network, a concept that will be incorporated into social movement theory. Diani's "relational approach" to the study of social movements²⁵ will become a branch of the RMT paradigm, since its analytical focus on relations and social networks was perceived to resolve the tensions between structuralist and culturalist tendencies within social movement theory. Following Melucci's line of argument, he also re-think a definition of social movements informed by this concern on social relations:

[Social movements] cannot be reduced to specific insurrections or revolts, but rather resemble strings of more or less connected events, scattered across time and space; they cannot be identified with any specific organization either, rather, they consist of groups and organizations, with various levels of formalization, linked in patterns of interaction which run from the fairly centralized to the totally decentralized, from the cooperative to the explicitly hostile. Persons promoting and/or supporting their actions do so not as atomized individuals, possibly with similar values or social traits, but as actors linked to each other through complex webs of exchanges, either direct or mediated. Social movements are, in other words, complex and highly heterogeneous network structures.

(Diani and McAdam 2003: 1)

Now, Diani's contribution is relevant for many reasons. For not only does he conceptualize the 'newness' of contemporary collective action, combining two concepts borrowed from traditional sociology²⁶, but he is also concerned with the role of new media. The latter aspect, however, requires some critical remarks. If he succeeds in re-thinking identities and political subjects in a more dynamic way, Diani fails to provide a proper conceptualization of media, regarding political actors as connected through a "web of exchanges" made of "direct or mediated" linkages (in Diani and McAdam 2003: 1). Accordingly, he conceives of media as either tools of communication or some kind of cultural and symbolic force to which users are subjected (see Diani 2000b; Diani and McAdam 2003: 8). Such an understanding infers a passivity on media users which has since long now proved to be extremely problematic (see Fiske 1989; Hall 1980; 2003; Liebes and Katz 1993).

A sharp distinction between instrumental and cultural dimension of media leads Diani to assume that Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) is more likely to mobilise existing

²⁵ For further reading on relational approaches to the study of social movements see Della Porta and Diani (1999; 2006), Diani (1992; 1996; 2000a; 2000b; 2004), Diani and McAdam (2003), Emirbayer (1994; 1997; 1998; 2005).

²⁶ I am here referring to the Rokkan's "political cleavage" and Simmel's "intersection of social circles". For his treatment of these notions see Diani (2000a).

solidarities than to create new ones (2000b: 397). But solidarities do not exist a priori; they, too, are created and socially constructed. And in so doing, it seems that, instead of being challenged or overcome, the problematic aspects of the main paradigms within social movement studies somewhat remain. Despite numerous attempts, the discipline still seems unable to overcome a sharp theoretical and methodological distinction between structural and symbolic dimensions.

No wonder, then, that many scholars have either called for more integration (Canel 1992) or radically critiqued them (Bayat 2005; Flacks in Goodwin and Jasper 2004: 135-153). Furthermore, not only do these approaches display a tendency to *hegemonize* the disciplinary field (see Flacks 2003), they also raise crucial questions about their proponents' positionality. Beyond the objectivist tone of their accounts, it is unclear the scholars' position with respect to the issues, groups and events they are examining. What is their position about imperialist wars and social inequalities produced by the neoliberal restructuring of the global economy? What is their position about the *dispositifs* of racial and gender hierarchization enacted to discipline labour? What is their position about the environmental disasters caused by the dogma of unlimited growth? How do they relate to movements and actors fighting against these problems? Without dismissing their value, these problems cannot be avoided without establishing a rigid divide between academics and activists, who should in fact be considered as a relevant segment of the audience. Hence, although a review of these approaches is necessary -for, as we shall see, they have deeply influenced the study of social movements in the Middle East- in the course of the argument I shall privilege perspectives aiming at the production of what Bevington and Dixon call "movement-relevant theory" (2005).

Political Islam, Islamist Activism and Nonmovements: Theoretical Approaches to the Study of Islamist Movements

Starting from the 1970s, the Middle East underwent a major process of geopolitical reconfiguration resulting from both domestic and international factors. The decade marked by the dramatic acceleration of globalization processes was also witnessing a growing appeal of religious-based movements. According to the (European) discourse on political modernity, religion was bound to retreat into the private sphere, its dominance within the public realm being inexorably replaced by scientific, secular and rational discourses and institutions. Yet the trend emerging throughout the Middle East seemed to point to the opposite direction, with religious ethos reclaiming a rather unsettling and unexpected centrality in public life.

To tackle such a phenomenon, the ensuing wave of scholarly production elaborated different categories and accounts. The categories employed to define it would often echo the discourse of

political modernity, casting the object of study as something returning from the past. Hence the currency acquired by such expressions as resurgence, revival or awakening (Ayubi 1980; Sivan 1990). Other scholars used the term 'Islamic fundamentalism' (see Tibi 1998; Abu Khalil 1994). I find useful to stress the political and ideological function of Islamic references, thus preferring terms such as political Islam, Islamism and Islamist activism.

In *Rethinking Islamist Politics*, Salwa Ismail provides both a definition of Islamism as well as a critical review of the main theoretical positions. She defines Islamism as “the process whereby various domains of social life are invested with signs and symbols associated with Islamic cultural traditions”. As an object of study, Ismail argues, Islamism has been analyzed as a “master-narrative”, according to “Durkheimian-inspired sociological models” or from “Statist/political economy perspectives” (2006: 2). To put it succinctly, the distinction suggests that the so-called “Islamic revival” has been explained by giving primacy to one factor over others. In the first case Islam as a religion remains the primary object of study, whereas the remaining two regard it as conveying interests and grievances rooted in either demographic factors or processes of political economy affecting the country²⁷.

To avoid the pitfalls of culturalism and structuralism, Ismail adopts a historicizing approach informed by critical anthropology²⁸. In doing so, she provides a more detailed account of the mobilization process, one that avoids the determinism inherent in both Durkheimian and statist models and instead focuses, following Tilly (1978), on the “infrastructures of action” (2006: 12). Furthermore, this move allows for the inscription of language and culture in a more wordly, material dimension. Under this light, the rhetoric and practices associated with Islamism are no

27 Ismail's critical remarks are all well placed and fully taken on board here. Hence, they shall not be rehearsed (2006: 2-14). For further reading on sociological approaches see Ibrahim (1980; 1982; 1988). For further reading on state-centred approaches see Ayubi (1991a; 1991b; 1995), Halliday (1995), Keddie (1969; 1994), Kepel (1985; 1995) Kramer (1993), Roy (1996), Vatikiotis (1991). As for the study of Islam as a master-narrative, a brief consideration is in order. True, the 'Islam vs. West' bifocal vision risks and often did reproduce highly abstract, ahistorical and culturally reductionist accounts of the region. This has taken both apologetic (see Esposito 1986, 1996, 1998; Esposito and Burgat 2003) and confrontational tones (Lewis 1998, 1994; Tibi 1986, 1998). Also, this discursive terrain was conducive to the articulation of a more dialogic position between liberalism and Islamism (see Baker 2003; Binder 1988; Kurzman 1998). Other critical remarks have been made by Bayat (2001, 2005, 2007a, 2007b: 2) and Dabashi (2008: 12-15; 2009: Ch.6). Yet, it is equally true that the discourse articulated by Islamism posed a fundamental epistemological challenge to Western conceptions of political modernity. In many occasions, this prompted a reconsideration of Eurocentric perspectives on religion and secularism. For further reading on this subject see in particular Anjum (2007), Asad (1983; 2003), Asad *et al.* (2009), Azmeh (1996), Euben (1995; 1997a; 1997b), Mahmood (2001; 2003a; 2003b; 2005; 2006) and Sayyid (1997).

28 Ismail inscribes her research within the path traced by authors such as Talal Asad or Sami Zubaida. Although both are not particularly concerned with social movement studies, their scholarship remains fundamental for an informed critical perspective on issues and problematiques specific to the subject. The former has been instrumental in constituting the field of anthropology of Islam (see note no. 2). Zubaida's work on the subject of political Islam retains all its actuality, especially in his treatment of Egyptian Islamist movements (1990; 1992). In chapter 2 I shall elaborate on his argument about the inherent modernity of the Muslim Brotherhood, advanced in *Islam, the People and the State* (1993: 155). The historical approach informing his research has recently been applied to the study of social and political institutions of the Middle East, in order to disarticulate their purported Islamicness and thus move beyond Islam as an all-explanatory factor (2011).

longer framed outside or above the historical context:

The materiality of culture and the mobilisation of cultural capital [...] are important determinants that interact with the political-economy determinants. That the idiom of 'Islam' came to express the grievances and claims of oppositional groups could not simply be a matter of displacement or convenience. Rather, structural transformations in the areas of cultural and educational production made it possible to transfer and instrumentalise the language of religion in the public space. [...] The instrumentalisation of these referents involves both dominant and dominated strata. In other words, cultural production enters into the constitution of power relations - a dynamic process shaping the position of various actors.

(Ismail 2006: 15)

Within the field of comparative politics, other scholars elaborated different strategies to overcome the limitations of dominant approaches²⁹. The volume edited by Quintan Wiktorowicz provides a comprehensive overview of scholars studying Islamism through the lens of social movement theory. Wiktorowicz puts emphasis on the political function of Islamist rhetoric while at the same time calling for a detailed analysis of mobilizational processes and institutions. To him, the adoption of social movement theory is fundamental especially in the study of Islamic activism, since the lack of coherent sociological models of inquiry reproduces “Islamic exceptionalism”:

[T]he study of Islamic activism has, for the most part, remained isolated from the plethora of theoretical and conceptual developments that have emerged from research on social movements and contentious politics. Instead, most publications on Islamic activism are either descriptive analyses of the ideology, structure, and goals of various Islamic actors or histories of particular movements. Other sociological dynamics typically remained unexamined or are downplayed as contingent upon the unique ideological orientation of Islam, thus implicitly essentializing Islamic activism as unintelligible in comparative terms and perpetuating beliefs in Islamic exceptionalism.

(Wiktorowicz 2004: 3)

This contribution also aims to challenge the troubling predominance of socio-psychological explanations in the study of political Islam. In order to do so, scholars explored the options provided by the three major approaches in social movement theory: Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT), Political Opportunity Structures (POS) or Opportunities and Constraints, Cultural and

²⁹ For more examples of how social movement theory has been received and applied to the study of Arab and Islamist movements see Back *et al.* (2009), Beinin and Varelil (2011), Delibas (2009), Meijer (1997; 2005; 2009) and Rosefsky-Wickham (2002; 2004; 2011). A further clarification is in order. The present section reviews the main perspectives informing the study of social movements, and its reception within Middle East Studies. These are predominantly non-Marxian, sociological approaches against which, in the following sections and chapters, I will raise some critical remarks. Although more limited in number, authors such as Beinin (2005) and Harman (1994) approached the subject of political Islam from a perspective more informed by class analysis, historical materialism and political economy. Along the same line, for further reading on the history of labor movements in Egypt and Middle East, the reader can start with Beinin (1981, 1987; 1999; 2001; 2010), Lockman (1994), Beinin and Lockman (1998).

Framing Processes. Singerman's contribution to the volume is of particular relevance, as it focuses on the Muslim Brotherhood from a relational perspective. Assessing the mobilizational capacity of the Muslim Brotherhood, she finds that a peculiar strength resides in the existence and reliance on what she calls “social networks”, that is “informal” or “submerged” networks within civil society. And especially under a heavy regime of control, such as that inhabited by the Ikhwan, Singerman argues that this is a fundamental aspect to understand social movements (in Wiktorowicz 2004: 155-159).

Singerman's focus on social relationships points to a growing attention to relational approaches and the concept of network within social sciences. Since Diani's approach (2000a; 2000b; 2003), social movement scholars used the concept of network to theorize agency (see Emirbayer 1994; 1997; 1998) and study transnational and global movements (see Della Porta 2005; 2006; Chesters and Welsh 2006). As far as social movements in the Middle East are concerned, one of the most original contributions is represented by Asef Bayat. Like many other scholars studying the region, Bayat turns to social movement theory to challenge conventional accounts of Islamist movements, often portrayed as “coherent social units which are to be identified by the discourse of their ideologues” (2005: 891).

His take on the subject is equally aware of the epistemological dangers prompted by the translation of analytical concepts from one context to another. Moving away from collectivism, structuralism and culturalism -informing respectively Collective Behavior, Resource Mobilization Theory and New Social Movements (see Bayat 2005: 891-893)- Bayat argues that the prevalent form of social movement in contemporary Middle East is a social nonmovement (2010). And in order to provide a positive definition of it, he contrasts the concept of nonmovement with Hardt and Negri's multitude. In the following sections I will raise some critical remarks about this comparison, arguing that the latter term opens up a more interesting path.

Social Nonmovements and the Multitude: Bayat and Autonomist Marxism

In *Life as Politics* (2010), Asef Bayat starts with a somber assessment of popular and academic discourse on the Middle East. He laments the “exceptionalist outlook” informing much of mainstream media and the Western “democracy promotion industry” (Bayat 2010: 27-42; also 2007a; 2007b: ch. 1). The tendency to consider the region, and its social movements, as inherently 'unique' has set its mode of knowledge production apart from the main perspectives informing social sciences. He thus welcomes the scholarly interest growing around social movement studies,

while also noting the troubles deriving from an uncritical reception of given conceptual tools³⁰.

Bayat argues that contemporary social movements in the region feature “unconventional forms of agency and activism”, for which social movement scholars lack an adequate conceptual vocabulary (Bayat 2010: 3-4). In fact, rather than merely posing challenges to conventional understandings, these forms seem to completely negate them. If one observes the three main subaltern groups -urban poor, women and youth- one discovers a different political culture of unstructured and yet common daily practices of resistance. Insofar as they do not wage any direct challenge to authority, they should be understood as *social nonmovements*, constituted by the “collective actions of noncollective actors” (*ibid.*: 18). Social nonmovements are “action-oriented” rather than “ideologically driven”; they “practice what they claim” rather than appealing to leaders who then mediate their demands with authorities; their political practices are embedded in everyday life rather than requiring a surplus of commitment; finally, everyday practices are not performed at/from the margins but are “*common*” to millions of people who enact them while remaining “*fragmented*”.

However, in openly acknowledging my indebtedness to his works³¹, I nonetheless find the concept of social nonmovements to be problematic. To begin with, a negative definition seems bound to be haunted by that which it negates: (Arab/Middle Eastern) *nonmovements* are what (Western) social movements are *not*. The problem emerges as soon as Bayat differentiates the latter from the former, arguing that Western social movements are rooted in “different genealogies” and “highly differentiated and politically open” societies (Bayat 2010: 4). In doing so, not only does he reproduce a hypostatized vision of liberaldemocratic, multicultural Western regimes but also neglects that such a vision is itself constitutive of and constituted by its negative Other/s. It seems as if the “exceptionalist outlook”, which Bayat struggles to overcome, had re-entered from the backdoor, with the underlying binary construction of the West confronting the Rest being restored to its central place.

A binary of this sort obscures the fact that Western regimes control the very definitions of openness and multiculturalism just like so many other terms³². It also fails to acknowledge the

30 In this respect, Ella Shohat (2001) also warned against this “sponge/addictive approach” and called for a relational approach, understood in a “translinguistic, dialogic, and historicized sense”, capable of translating “ideas” from one context to another.

31 Notions such as the “quiet encroachment of the ordinary” (2010: ch. 3, 4) come from the study of urban poor, workers and informal economy. For further readings on this subject see Bayat (1991; 1993; 1997); on comparative politics, mostly between Iran and Egypt, and social movement theory see Bayat (1992; 1998; 2000; 2001; 2005); on street politics, and its representation in western media and policy circles, see Bayat (1997; 2000; 2003; 2010: ch. 8, 11).

32 I am here referring to constitutive dichotomies such as, for example, Islam vs. West, terrorism vs. humanitarian intervention and modernity/development. For a critique of the first binary opposition see Dabashi (2007: Introduction; 2009: Ch. 6) and Said (1978; 1993); on terrorism and humanitarian intervention see Asad (2009). On the constitutive role of the political modernity/development couplet see Amin (2009: Ch. 1, 3), Escobar (1998; 1991;

violence used by Western regimes -so open and different from Bayat's privileged location- against internal dissent. The sheer amount of surveillance and repressive techniques deployed to crush protests against neoliberal austerity in Europe and North America should provide enough empirical evidence to argue the contrary³³. One might note that, far from being an exception, violence has always been constitutive *within* Western 'imagined communities'³⁴. It is also important to remember that the 'openness' and 'pluralism' of Western societies is in fact constituted by *dispositifs* aimed at disciplining and reproducing internal hierarchies along class, race and gender lines³⁵.

Even Bayat, then, seems not immune to forms of exceptionalism and it becomes clear when his “social nonmovements” are further fleshed out. First of all, the political implications and dimension of the everyday life have been on the radar of contemporary social sciences for long time³⁶. Various anarchist traditions and currents might have something to say about movements being “action-oriented” rather than “ideologically driven”, since direct action constitutes a pillar of traditional anarchist thought³⁷. Finally, the last defining feature of social nonmovements calls forth a contender Bayat cannot avoid. Arguing that the power of social nonmovements comes from the fragmented and yet common practices of individuals, he has to confront Hardt and Negri's concept of *multitude* (2000: 393-413) and distinguish it from nonmovements. In order to do so, he spends some paragraphs to elaborate on this difference:

By thinking about nonmovements in this fashion, are we not in a sense conjuring up Hardt and Negri's concept of *multitude* [...]? At first glance, the enormous magnitude as well as the fragmentation of social subjects associated with *multitude* reminds one of nonmovements and the “power of big numbers.” But the resemblance stops there. Unlike

1992; 2000; 2004a; 2004b; 2005; 2011), Hobart (1993), Mignolo (2002; 2007) and Quijano (2000; 2007). For a counter-history of Western liberalism see Losurdo (2011).

33 As the recent cycle of protests against neoliberalism shows, social movements in Greece, UK, USA, Spain and Italy is being met with the same authoritarian stance. The last twenty years have also been marked by the rise and dramatic fall of the movement against corporate globalization (see Fernandez 2008; Graeber 2011a; Notes from Nowhere 2003; Curran 2006: ch. 2; Starr 2001, 2005). Also, there has been an increasing radicalization of autonomous struggles at local, regional and national levels. The list here would be endless. An excellent account of European autonomous social movements is provided by Katsiaficas (2006), for struggles in Greece see Schwarz *et al.* (2010).

34 But this aspect is often only visible through the works of social historians such as Zinn (1980) and Thompson (1966), Churchill's work on American Indian struggles (2005), Gramsci's writings on Italy's *Southern Question* (see Verdicchio 2005) or, along the same line, Ferrari Bravo and Serafini (1972).

35 On the racialization of Arab/Muslims see Dabashi (2011); for a critical approach on multiculturalism see Shohat (2003); for further readings on Islamophobia see Mignolo (2006), Puar (2007), Puar and Rai (2002), Rana (2007; 2010), Sundstrom (2010). The representational logic of identity politics has been critiqued by Day (2005: ch. 3), Papadopoulos *et al.* (2008: ch. 1) and Rancière (2006; 2010).

36 I am here referring to the works of Bourdieu (1972), de Certeau (1984), Goffman (1956) and Lefebvre (1976). The discipline of media and cultural studies has been highly receptive (see Franklin 2004; Highmore 2002a; 2002b; 2006; Sabry 2010). For similar theoretical arguments, more informed by poststructuralist theory, see Braidotti's approach to micropolitics (2002), Day's critique of hegemony (2005), and Papadopoulos *et al.* on “imperceptible politics” and “escape routes” (2008).

37 On anarchist conceptions of direct action see Graham (2005: Vol. 1, ch. 10), Graeber (2009), Guérin (2005: Vol. 2, ch. 2) and Franks (2006: 93-152).

categories of working class, people, or mass, which are marked by sameness and shared identities, *multitude* is made up of “singularities,” or dissimilar or nonidentical social subjects, a mix of different social groups, gender clusters, or sexual orientations that are ontologically different [...]. Thus, whereas multitude is assumed to bring together singular and ontologically different social subjects (men, women, black, white, various ethnicities, etc.), nonmovements galvanize members of the same, even though internally fragmented, groups (e.g. globalizing youth, Muslim women, illegal migrants, or urban poor), who act in common, albeit often individually. While in nonmovements, collective action is a function of shared interests and identities within a single group, especially when confronted by a common threat, in a multitude, it is not clear precisely how the singular components are to come and act together, and how these different groups (e.g. men and women, native working class and migrant workers, or dominant and subordinate ethnicities) avoid conflicts of interests between them, let alone act in common.

(Bayat 2010: 21-22)

What I find quite problematic is the way in which the social subjects composing the two different analytical concepts are characterized. It is absolutely unclear why “men, women, black, white, various ethnicities” (*multitude*) are “singular and ontologically different social subjects”, while “globalizing youth, Muslim women, illegal migrants, or urban poor” (*social nonmovements*) are instead “members of the same, even though internally fragmented”. In stressing the difference between the subjects composing the multitude, Bayat obliterates obvious commonalities and intersections. For black or white wo/men do exist. The reverse operation leads to the same result with social nonmovements. Bayat downplays internal differences, essentializes categories such as “Muslim women” and treats them in isolation from one another. Somehow, differences among women seem to be less relevant than those dividing women from men and other categories. Rather than overcoming the lacunae of existing scholarship, such an analytical concept seems to re-articulate them anew. In order to specify further his argument, he partially addresses these problematic nodes arguing that nonmovements' collective identities are primarily forged through what he calls “passive networks”:

If, unlike in a multitude, common identities are essential for agents of nonmovements to act collectively, how are these identities forged among fragmented and atomized subjects in the first place? And why do they act in common if they are not deliberately mobilized by organizations or leaders? Collective identities are built not simply in open and legal institutions or solidarity networks, of which they are in general deprived due to surveillance. Solidarities are forged primarily in public spaces-in neighborhoods, on street corners, in mosques, in workplaces, at bus stops, or in rationing lines, or in detention centers, migrant camps, public parks, colleges, and athletic stadiums-through what I have called “passive networks.” [...] They refer to instantaneous communications between atomized individuals, which are established by tacit recognition of their commonalities directly in public spaces or indirectly through mass media.

(Bayat 2010: 22)

But such a theoretical argument rests on a set of problematic binary constructions:

direct/indirect interactions, passive/active networks, collective identities/atomized individuals. The first dichotomy has been problematized at least since Goffman's works on everyday social interactions (see 1971a; 1971b; 1972a; 1972b), whereas the remaining two rehearse an argument against which Marx's ruthless criticism retains all its validity³⁸. This methodological individualism becomes visually evident in the figures used to represent different patterns of social networks. While "passive networks" are the result of "imagined solidarities" forged by atomized individuals brought in similar positions through space, "active networks" result from the conscious, deliberate association of individuals with similar position³⁹. In my view, then, the alternative proposed by Bayat seems far from being a viable one. In re-thinking unity and difference together, he conjures up the multitude yet retains the very conceptual vocabulary the latter intends to overcome.

Like social nonmovements the multitude, too, is an attempt to think unity in difference. Unlike Bayat, however, Hardt and Negri move away from a liberal theory of cultural identity, pointing to a "constitutive process of subjectivity" (2000: 397) and, most importantly, elaborating the *common* to overcome the public/private, individual/collective dichotomies. The argument, in other words, is more complex than Bayat's rendering of it. The multitude is composed by heterogeneous subjectivities (not identities), yet they all share a common subjection to the capitalist mode of production. The multitude, Hardt and Negri argue, is made of "exploited" and "subjugated"; it is "not formed simply by throwing together and mixing nations and peoples indifferently" but brought together by "cooperation and communication" (2000: 393-394). Neither isolated nor atomized, subjectivities are always already connected, and it is out of this cooperative, communicative dynamic that they produce the common:

Singularities interact and communicate socially on the basis of the common, and their social communication in turn produces the common. The multitude is the subjectivity that emerges from this dynamic of singularity and commonality.

(Hardt and Negri 2004: 198)

In *Empire*, Hardt and Negri acknowledge the complexity and fragmentation of the contemporary modes of production, but retain an analytical focus on social class. Rather than re-assembling political subjectivities along culturalist lines, as Bayat partly does, they contend that the

38 For Marx, the individual is "the ensemble of [his/her] social relations" (Thesis 6, *Theses on Feuerbach*). S/he is never isolated but always inserted into, and indeed defined by, the social relationships s/he entertains. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx would famously label as "eighteenth-century Robinsonades" the positions of Smith and Ricardo who regarded the individual "[n]ot as a historic result but as history's point of departure": "an isolated individual outside society [...] is as much of an absurdity as is the development of language without individuals living together and talking to each other" (Marx 1993: 83-84).

39 I am here referring to figures 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, and 1.5 in Bayat (2010: 23). Although I focus on figures 1.4 and 1.5, further support to my critique is provided particularly by figures 1.2 and 1.3. There Bayat envisages the absence of network, with atomized individuals having no connections even when they share or occupy similar positions.

working class is still defined by its relation to capital: the “fact of being within capital and sustaining capital”, Hardt and Negri argue, “is what defines the proletariat as a class” (2000: 53-54). Such a shared condition of subjection is also what unites social struggles, which, according to Negri, exercise the “constituent power” -that is the power to change the material constitution, to alter on the ground the relations of power (see Negri 1999: 1-36). He would further elaborate upon these reflections while participating and examining contemporary social movements, whose main feature in his view is that of producing the commons, creating “new public spaces and new form of community” (Hardt and Negri 2000: 56; see also Hardt and Negri 2012).

The argument of *Empire* is part of a trilogy -*Multitude* (2004) and *Commonwealth* (2009)- with which Hardt and Negri articulate a critique of financial capitalism, and name a form of counter-power, the multitude, whose political project is that of building the “institution of the common” (2009: 128). *Empire* has attracted an incredible amount of scholarly attention, with many scholars raising valid critical points⁴⁰, and Hardt and Negri taking on board some of the major criticisms, especially on their Eurocentrism (2004: 129). However, while considering their arguments as anything but immune from criticism, the political project they envision -that of constituting the *common*, outside, both the private realm of the markets as well as the public domain of nation-states- that I intend to inscribe my research.

However, it is necessary to move beyond their trilogy and realize that it represents just the tip of the iceberg. To begin with, Negri's scholarship goes well beyond the trilogy co-authored with Michael Hardt and is rooted in that heterodox reading of Marx's oeuvre called *autonomist Marxism*. This label was first used by Harry Cleaver to refer to those movements, such as Italian *operaismo* (workerism)⁴¹, arguing that the working class is a subject autonomous from both capitalist command and the dictates of trade unions and political parties (Cleaver 2001: 14-15). Concepts such as refusal to work or class composition would become fundamental to see the working class as an autonomous force (Tronti in Lotringer 2007: 29; see also Tronti 1966a; 1966b), and a historically specific formation subjected, that is, to processes of class composition and decomposition (see Alquati 1975; Negri 1996; Tronti in Lum 2008: ch. 3).

This research current also branched off in multiple directions. Scholars working within the

40 See for examples Arrighi (2002), Balakrishnan *et al.* (2003), Borón (2005), Dean and Passavant (2003). For more sympathetic views, which I am inclined to subscribe, see Dyer-Whiteford (in Dahlberg and Siapera 2007: ch. 11, 191-206), Murphy and Mustapha (2005; 2007), Poster (2006: 46-66).

41 In the 1950s, a group of Marxists (e.g. Raniero Panzieri, Mario Tronti, Romano Alquati) would gather around the publication *Quaderni Rossi* (Red Notebooks) and give birth to what is now commonly known as Italian *operaismo* (workerism). Toni Negri would join them in the 1960s and work within movements such as *Potere Operaio* (Workers' Power) and, in 1973, *Autonomia Operaia* (Workers' Autonomy). For further reading on the history of *Autonomia* see Allen (1987), Balestrini (2011), Bianchi and Caminiti (2007), Borio *et al.* (2002; 2005), Cleaver (2001), Lotringer (2007: 148-219) and Wright (2002; 2008).

autonomist tradition prompted a process of cross-fertilization with other disciplines, and re-interpreted Marxian categories such as primitive accumulation, class, cooperation and general intellect (see LUM 2008). Yann Moulier-Boutang introduced a concern for ethnicity in his study of migrant labour (1998). Sandro Mezzadra and Anna Curcio tackle phenomena such as migrant labour, racism and gender from a postcolonial perspective, trying to maintain capitalist relations firmly in the picture (Curcio and Mellino 2010; Mezzadra 2006; 2011). Silvia Federici, Alisa dal Re and Maria Rosa Dalla Costa are investigating the intersections between gender and capitalism and providing a materialist analysis of domestic work (see Dalla Costa 2004; Del Re 2008; Federici 2011).

Even more importantly, this new research agenda included a series of investigations on immaterial labour, which Hardt and Negri consider the hegemonic form of labour (2004: 65), that intersect at various crucial nodes issues and concern of media and cultural studies. The reflections of scholars such as Virno, Lazzarato and Terranova are central in my understanding of contemporary media as they offer a critical perspective capable of going beyond mere textual analysis, and put back their material dimension in the analytical framework. In the following section, I will discuss in greater detail the insights of the abovementioned authors.

Materialist perspectives on New Media, Digital Culture and Free Labour

Let me return for a moment to the main research questions. What is the political role of digital technologies? Granted they do not lead a revolution, what kind of political effects might new media be said to have? How can one conceive of the role digital technologies have been playing for contemporary social movements, assessing both their potentialities as well as their constitutive ambivalence? I argue that autonomist marxism provides an analytical toolbox capable to critically grasp social movements and their uses of digital technologies, as well as the potentialities and setbacks of such an engagement. The theoretical rationale behind this move is twofold. First, to reiterate once again, a narrow focus on Hardt and Negri's trilogy occludes the view a far richer scholarship reconceiving the Marxian vocabulary in light of French poststructuralism and subaltern studies. In no way is this an isolated or unique example. *Pace* Callinicos (1989; 2010), several contributions are now engaging in a critical dialogue with the scholarship of authors such as Baudrillard, Foucault, Deleuze and Derrida, so as to re-articulate a materialist perspective informed by post-structuralist critiques (see Abbinett 2006; Braidotti 2010; Coole and Frost 2010; Therborn 2008; Thoburn 2003). Despite a rather conflictual relationship, the field of postcolonial studies, too, is in no small part constituted by the contributions of numerous scholars articulating a critical

engagement with Marxian thought, and countering the sweeping charges of Eurocentrism launched by less sympathetic peers⁴².

Also, a similar movement is taking place within media and cultural studies. Paying close attention to the political economy of communication, Garnham has timely noted the shift from “cultural” to “creative” industries taking place in UK policy-making circles and discourses (2005), while others have rightly critiqued the ideological *manteau* accompanying and legitimizing its ascendance (see Lovink and Rossiter 2007; Raunig *et al.* 2011). Other scholars called for a greater integration between media studies and political economy (Babe 2008), placed the question of social class squarely back at the centre of their analytical frameworks (Bennett *et al.* 2009), or worked towards the formulation of a Marxian approach to the analysis of film and visual culture (Wayne 2003; 2005).

Such a tendency is even more pronounced once recent scholarship on digital technologies is considered. There now is a growing corpus of theoretical knowledge addressing the social aspects of software, interfaces and networks (see Fuller 2003, 2005, 2008; Manovich 1999, 2002, 2008; Galloway 2004, 2006; Galloway and Thacker 2004, 2007). Other contributions have explored the pervasiveness of digital technologies and its socio-cultural implications, stressing the improvement of surveillance techniques (Finn 2009), examining the macro-changes occurring with and through technology (Kittler 1990; 1997; 1999; 2009; Parikka 2010; Poster 1990; 1995; 2006), advancing radical philosophical arguments about technology, new media and their impact on societies (Hansen 2004; Lovink 2003; 2005; 2007; Poster and Savat 2009; Stiegler 1998; 2008; 2010). What is even more related to the present discussion is the fact these new currents have had repercussions and influenced the research agenda of social movement studies. Dealing with the growing mediatization of contemporary social movements, scholars and researchers had to take on board issues and concepts from media studies. While some scholars work within the traditional current of social movement studies (see Donk *et al.* 2004; Hands 2011; Jong *et al.* 2005), others have a more decidedly participant perspective (Atton 2001; Busch 2006; Costa and Philip 2008; Dartnell 2006; Jordan 1999, 2002, 2009; Joyce 2010; Juris 2005a, 2005b; Juris *et al.* 2008; Rossiter 2006; Wark 2004).

It is within this convergence between materialism, media theory and social movement studies that many scholars find helpful the contributions of authors working within autonomist marxism. Authors such as Paolo Virno and Tiziana Terranova, in particular, are better equipped to articulate a

42 The case for a critical reprochement between Marxism and postcolonial studies has been made by Bartolovich and Lazarus (2002), while Benita Parry has elaborated a brilliant materialist critique of contemporary postcolonial studies (2004). For further reading see Ahmad (1994), Amin (2009 [1988]), Chakrabarty (2008), Chatterjee (1981; 1988a; 1988b; 1999), Dirlik (1987; 1994; 1999; 2005; 2007), James (1986; 1989), Mezzadra (2006; 2011).

critical, materialist analysis of digital culture and activism. In the works of these scholars one finds extremely useful theoretical considerations which an exclusive focus on *Empire*, despite the fact that it has also served to popularize autonomist marxism within academic circles, often obfuscates. So much so that it has now become possible to speak about the existence of an “autonomist school of communication” (Brophy and Coté 2005; Coté 2003).

It is from this perspective that the concept of “immaterial labour”, for example, is to be understood. Maurizio Lazzarato coined the term, with Toni Negri, to refer to the pervasive restructuring of production, distribution and consumption engendered by what is defined as post-Fordism or cognitive capitalism (Lazzarato 1992; 1997; Lazzarato and Negri 1991). In opposition to the Taylorist/Fordist mode of production, where the linearity of assembly lines and 'hard' industrial manufacture occupied the centre stage, this mode of production is distinguished by the growth of the third sector, the informatization of production, distribution and consumption, as well as the affirmation of what the Frankfurt School presciently called the “culture industry” (see Horkheimer and Adorno 1972: 94-136). The factory explodes within society and the assembly line is replaced by highly dense and coordinated networked units, the primary function of which is that of improving cooperation itself. This is a linguistic, communicative and cooperative task, one in which the relation between knowledge and production is fundamentally re-articulated so that the former becomes the main productive force of contemporary capitalism.

The way in which this transformation has been conceptualized varies greatly. To begin with, the term was always conceived of as a preliminary attempt. Lazzarato uses it to refer to changes in the production of both “informational” and “cultural” contents of commodities, where the first indicates the skills required by the new labour process whereas the latter refers to activities “not normally recognized as “work”” (in Virno and Hardt 1996: 133). Hardt and Negri acknowledge its ambivalence and risks, ponders alternative solutions and eventually stick to it because it seems more adequate to grasp “the general tendency of economic transformation” (2004: 109). Other scholars have opted for different solutions (see Vercellone 2007; 2008; 2012; Marazzi 2008; 2011).

I would rather leave aside the quest for an 'objective', economic law of contemporary capitalism, for this is not the point here. From a media perspective, the most interesting theoretical developments this intellectual tradition offers is its philosophical and political engagement with language and knowledge, without losing sight of their material dimension. As Nick Dyer-Witheford has rightly argued, autonomist marxism performs “an inventive reading” of the Marxian body of knowledge to produce “a counter-interpretation of the information revolution” (1999: 130-131). Indeed, only by looking at Marx's reflections on the increasing relevance of “objectified” knowledge and what he calls *general intellect* is it possible to comprehend the argument behind

labels such as immaterial labour:

Nature builds no machines, no locomotives, railways, electric telegraphs, self-acting mules etc. These are products of human industry: natural material transformed into organs of the human will over nature, or of human participation in nature. They are *organs of the human brain, created by the human hand*: the power of knowledge, objectified. The development of fixed capital indicates to what degree general social knowledge has become a direct force of production, and to what degree, hence, the conditions of the process of social life itself have come under the control of the general intellect and been transformed in accordance with it.

(Grundrisse 1993: 706)

In this respect, one of the most interesting re-articulation of the Marxian vocabulary is represented by the work of Paolo Virno, whose insights are better equipped to provide a materialist conception of language, knowledge and media. The Italian philosopher operates a fundamental re-articulation of the arguments put forward by critical theorists and the Frankfurt School, following which the nature of both cultural industry and contemporary labour emerge profoundly reconfigured. Rather than being “factories of the soul” conforming to the Fordist imperatives of “serialization and standardization”, in Virno's analysis the communication industry assumes the role of “*industry of the means of production*”, whose particularity is that of consisting of “linguistic competencies inseparable from living labor” (2004: 61). And this implies a reversal of the position maintained by the Frankfurt School:

In the culture industry [...] it was therefore necessary to maintain a certain space that was informal, not programmed, one which was open to unforeseen spark, to communicative and creative improvisation [...]. However, for the Frankfurt School, these aspects were nothing but un-influential remnants, remains of the past, waste. What counted was the general Fordization of the culture industry. [...] [Yet] [t]hese were not remnants, but anticipatory omens. The informality of communicative behavior, the competitive interaction typical of a meeting, the abrupt diversion that can enliven a television program [...] has become now, in the post-Ford era, a typical trait of the entire realm of social production.

(*ibid.*: 59)

This newly-found relevance of linguistic and cognitive faculties also implies a radical change in the nature of labour. Here, Marx's reflections on the changes brought about by the large-scale application of knowledge within capitalism emerges clearly. Once knowledge is applied to production it then becomes the main productive force, with labour moving “*to the side* instead of being its chief actor” (Marx 1993: 705). Under this light, the “subjective” position of the worker is that of a facilitator in charge of the supervision, rather than the actual execution, of the productive process. And it is precisely here that linguistic cooperation acquires its centrality:

When “subjective” cooperation becomes the primary productive force, labor activities display a marked linguistic-communicative quality, they entail the presence of others. The monological feature of labor dies away: the relationship with others is a driving, basic element, not something accessory. Where labor moves *to the side* of the immediate productive process, instead of being one of its components, productive cooperation is a “publicly organized space.”

(Virno 2004: 61-62)

Virno also redefines Marx's concept of *general intellect*. Where the latter understood it as objectified knowledge in fixed capital, the former regards as the score of the multitude under post-Fordism, something that instead of being fixed into machines unfolds in linguistic cooperation, in “dialogical *performances*, linguistic games” (Virno 2004: 65). One should only think to the myriads of practices animating digital cultures -from marketing campaigns to citizen journalism and virus-like consumption patterns of multimedia content- to realize the analytical potential of this Marxian concept.

Among those elaborating further on this line of research on digital technologies a critical contribution comes from Tiziana Terranova. Her scholarship offers yet another example of disciplinary cross-fertilization, this time with the British school of cultural studies. To be sure, she maintains a critical perspective on such a tradition, because of the historical trajectory and the analytical concepts through which its analyses of digital culture are framed. For one, her cultural analytics moves in the opposite direction of traditional approaches exclusively concerned with issues of meaning and representation. In her views, the cultural politics of cyberspace is to take into account for the fact that there now is a completely different imperative of information, which semiotics is unable to tackle:

[M]eaning has not simply disappeared in the infosphere but that it has multiplied and proliferated [...] emerging out of and giving rise to classes, genders, sexualities, ethnicities, and races. But we cannot still reconcile this proliferation and dispersal of meaning with another dimension of contemporary culture, the one that is not simply structured around the codification of meaning and its articulation into social practices but which revolves around a disturbing imperative and a characteristic dynamics. [...] Here it is not so much a question of meanings that are encoded and decoded in texts but a question of inclusion and exclusion, connection and disconnection, of informational warfare, and new forms of knowledge and power (from public relations to public communication and perception management) that address not so much the play of meaning but the overall dynamics of an open informational milieu.

(2004b: 52)

Terranova's scholarship is to be placed within an increasingly widespread current whose main

analytical focus is the materiality of media⁴³ which the British sociologist Nick Gane has quite aptly defined “media materialism” (2005). Her work appears to be even more firmly located within the autonomist tradition, for in her view too information has now become not only the main productive force, but in fact the central commodity of contemporary capitalism. Taking as her point of departure Shannon's mathematical theory of information (1948), Terranova conceives of information as a material force producing an informational milieu, where meaning is subordinate to its dynamics:

Information, that is, might be more than simply the content of a communication. We are no longer mostly dealing with information that is transmitted from a source to a receiver, but increasingly also with informational dynamics – that is with the relation between noise and signal, including fluctuations and microvariations, entropic emergencies and negentropic emergences, positive feedback and chaotic processes. If there is an informational quality to contemporary culture, then it might be not so much because we exchange more information than before, or even because we buy, sell or copy informational commodities, but because cultural processes are taking on the attributes of information – they are increasingly grasped and conceived in terms of their informational dynamics.

(Terranova 2004a: 7)

To this new informational milieu corresponds a specific kind of laboring activity, which sustains and reproduces it. In order to characterize such an activity, Terranova turns to the reflections of autonomist thinkers such as Lazzarato and Virno. To express the way in which digital culture reproduces itself through the labour of its users, she argues that the internet is a place where “a flexible, collective networked intelligence comes into being” (2004a: 75). And the term she chooses to refer to it is a slightly modified version of immaterial labour. Instead of being immaterial, for Terranova digital culture is reproduced through free labour:

Simultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited, free labour on the Net includes the activity of building web sites, modifying software packages, reading and participating in mailing lists and building virtual spaces. Far from being an 'unreal', empty space, the Internet is animated by cultural and technical labour through and through, a continuous production of value which is completely immanent in the flows of the network society at large.

(*ibid.*: 74)

Now, I find this concept extremely useful when applied to the practices of cultural production performed by contemporary social movements. Terranova's understanding of digital culture has several merits. First, it is concerned with the question of power, to put it succinctly, since in her

43 For example see Fuchs (2009a; 2009b; 2010; 2011), Fuller (2003; 2005; 2008), Galloway (2004; 2006), Galloway and Thacker (2004), Gane (2005; 2006), Haraway (1990; 1991), Hayles (1999; 2002; 2005), Kittler (1990; 1997; 1999), Kleiner (2010), Manovich (2002; 2008) Parikka (2010).

work capital's apparatuses of capture and subjectification are always in plain sight. What is more, one finds a materialist conceptualization informed by both poststructuralism and cultural studies. Second, her understanding of networks provides us with a useful analytical framework to examine and assess both potentialities and newly-acquired modes of control, surveillance and domination. And last but not least, despite the fact that it is not being traditionally deployed, the class point of view is still present and operative. Yet what I find somewhat missing, or even better, open to further refinement is still a specific definition of the role of media. If one skims through the contributions of the authors treated in this chapter, a general tendency to use 'neutral' or 'instrumental' definition of media emerges. Terms such as relay, node, machine, means, assemblage, apparatus appear to be the preferred choices. In doing so, a specific role of media is either negated or seen as secondary. Is it possible to conceptualize new media in a different way? Is it possible to give new media a more coherent definition? To address these questions, the next chapter argues that the concept of archive might represent a viable solution.

Conclusion

In this chapter I reviewed the main theoretical approaches shaping the field of Social Movement Theory (SMT). Earlier accounts of collective action understood it in a socio-psychological framework, where structural strains or psychological discomforts were often put in linear, direct and causal relation to collective action. To counter this perspective, later approaches highlighted the 'rational' motives behind collective action. From the 1960s onwards, the emergent paradigm of Resource Mobilization Theory (see Tilly 1978). This approach will soon be critiqued for its lack of dynamism and neglect of cultural and symbolic aspects, as New Social Movements (NSM) seemed to be characterized by their cultural identity (Melucci 1996). A further contribution is provided by the work of Mario Diani, who formulates a relational approach to the study of social movements (Diani and McAdam 2003).

These are the main approaches that will influence the study of social movements in the Middle East. There have been several attempts to counteract the dominance of psycho-social understandings of collective action. Several scholars, mainly coming from comparative politics, started to turn to SMT and apply it to the study of Islamist movements. Salwa Ismail proposes a radically historicizing approach, informed by critical anthropology, others turn decidedly to SMT (2001; 2006). Wiktorowicz's edited volume offers a comprehensive overview of the various ways in which SMT analytical concepts have been applied. Relational approaches and the concept of network are useful to study the mobilizational capacities of Islamist movements (Wiktorowicz

2004). In this respect, an original contribution comes from Bayat, who grounds his social nonmovements precisely on the concept of network (Bayat 2010).

Bayat's understanding, however, is problematic. For not only does it seem to reproduce what it has tried to distantiate from, but in doing so it also obscures and evades existing approaches which might be worth exploring further. The concept of multitude, in particular, seems to be better equipped to perform the task Bayat assigns to social nonmovements. It also points to a rich and dynamic tradition, autonomist Marxism, whose basic analytical premise assumes that the working class is an autonomous subject - that is capable of acting politically without the mediation of both trade unions and political parties. Negri himself would contributed to the development of such an analytical perspective, elaborating concepts such as the refusal of work and the constituent power of social struggles (Negri 1996; 1999; see also Tronti 1996a; 1966b).

What is more, beyond Hardt and Negri's trilogy (2000; 2004; 2009), not only is this current re-thinking Marx's oeuvre in light of poststructuralist theory; scholars working within this tradition have also elaborated critiques of several aspects of contemporary societies, such as migrant (Curcio 2008; Mezzadra 2006) and reproductive labour (Federici 2004). More importantly, scholars such as Lazzarato (1991; 1997), Terranova (2004a) and Virno (2004) provide the conceptual tools for a critical understanding of the transformations brought about by the large-scale deployment of digital technologies. In particular, Terranova's perspective on digital culture -seen as an informational milieu mainly constituted by the cooperative, free labour of its users- represent a powerful critical argument against facile assumptions about the power of new media. The arguments presented in this chapter constitute the basic theoretical premises upon which the thesis elaborates its analytical framework. In the following chapters, I will further refine autonomists' perspective, proposing a different way to think about new media and the role they play for contemporary social movements.

The concept of archive, I argue, might be used to study digital media as cultural artifacts and trace the power relations that constitute them. It is hoped that such a move will contribute to the development of materialist approaches to cultural politics and digital activism. Three chapters will examine a selection of media outlets established by the Muslim Brotherhood through this analytical lens. The Muslim Brotherhood has been experimenting with digital technologies since the late 1990s. Small websites and weblogs were launched and maintained by individual members or small branches, until the grassroots' demands for an official online presence will lead the group to launch two official websites. However, while some of these media have certainly been beneficial to the organization, the same forces mobilized to produce them will autonomously constitute as a political subjectivity -the MB bloggers- capable to question the group's decision-making process and pierce the ideological veil of unity and cohesion.

Chapter 2

Arab New Media: Emergence, Theoretical Debates, and the Case for Archival Media

The present chapter looks at how new media were introduced in the region and the actors who contributed to their diffusion. The first section sketches a brief outline describing the slow yet steady growth of an Egyptian cyberspace. Though the figures may seem modest, if compared to those of more affluent countries, they also show a constant positive trend unfolding from early 2000s. This was also due to policies and programs implemented by the Egyptian government, aimed at boosting the IT sector in the country. At the same time, however, such an infrastructural development created the conditions for social movements to territorialize the cyberspace with their presences and activities. What emerges is a complex scenario where different, and often contradictory, forces contributed to the constitution of a thriving Egyptian blogosphere.

I will then review the main theoretical arguments framing the research on digital technologies in the Arab world. The emerging field of Arab media studies has had a complex and inherently interdisciplinary development. Just as that concerned with Arab mass media, the study of digital technologies is informed by theoretical and methodological approaches mutated from political economy or political communication, with other contributions being informed by either anthropology or, more recently, media and cultural studies. The increasing interest and media hype generated by digital activism and the penetration of internet technologies in the Arab world has prompted scholars to engage more decidedly with social movement theories.

While I do not intend to dismiss the value of such contributions, I nonetheless choose to pursue a different path, discussed in the previous chapter. I argued that the insights of autonomist marxism might be helpful in the study of new media and contemporary digital activism. However, once conceptual definitions of new media are considered something is missing. Rather than confiding in instrumentalist notions such as 'machines' or 'tools', the theoretical move proposed in the concluding section of this chapter suggests to approach the study of new media through the notion of archive. This concept acquired a theoretical status following the reflections of theorists such as Foucault and Derrida, and it will be applied to the study of postcolonial history and new media scholars concerned with the proliferation of digital technologies. Having laid out the main theoretical approaches, the following chapters will then proceed to read a selection of cases of study through the concept of archive.

New Media in Egypt: A Brief Outline

During the last century, the institutions in charge of treating, processing and distributing information have dramatically evolved, with mass media acquiring an ever greater role in culture, politics and society. In the Middle East, the print press was introduced at the end of XIXth Century and was instrumental in the diffusion of national sentiment, independence struggles and political projects. In the 1950s, a similar role was to be played by radio and television, with the state being always the leading player, if not the only one. Indeed, due to the absence of a private sector, low advertising revenues and literacy rates, Arab governments were the only players able to afford the costs and management of such burdensome technologies (Rugh 2004: 5). As a result, with the growing diffusion of radio and television Arab governments retained an almost complete control over the information flow (Eickelman and Anderson 2003: 3). Further developments of broadcasting technologies and the emergence of satellite tv channels would profoundly reconfigure this ecology, diversifying regional and national media landscapes in terms of actors, structures and contents (Alterman 1998; Ayish 2003; Sakr 2001; 2007a; 2007b).

Over the past three decades, the diffusion of digital technologies has further enriched the Arab mediascape. The growing internet penetration in the Middle East is a hotly debated topic in both academic as well as popular discourse. With a penetration rate of 40.2%, slightly above the world average (34.3%), the Internet users in the Middle East only represents a tiny portion of the world users (3.7%)⁴⁴. In June 2010, Arabic occupied the 7th position in the top ten languages in the internet with almost 70 millions of users⁴⁵. Even though it is grouped with African countries, it is however possible to draw a comparison between Egypt and Middle Eastern countries. With almost 30 millions of internet users⁴⁶, Egypt is second only to Iran, whose 42 millions users make it the most connected country in the region⁴⁷. It is important to note that its internet penetration rate is rather modest if compared to other Arab countries. With a penetration rate of 35.6%⁴⁸, Egypt falls behind all of the gulf countries as well as Jordan, Lebanon and the West Bank⁴⁹. The situation changes once Egypt is compared with African countries, whose figures are generally lower than those of Egypt. With internet penetration rates being respectively of 39% and 51%, Tunisia⁵⁰ and Morocco⁵¹ are better connected than Egypt. However, if one considers users' figures, in Africa

44 <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm>

45 <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats7.htm>

46 <http://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm#eg>

47 <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm>

48 <http://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm#eg>

49 <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm>

50 <http://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm#tn>. With 4 millions of users, Tunisia has an internet penetration rate of 39%.

51 <http://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm#ma>. With nearly 17 millions of users, Morocco has an internet penetration rate of 51%.

Egypt is second only to Nigeria⁵². It is relevant to note that, once Facebook users are taken into consideration, with its 12 millions of subscribers Egypt is second to none both in Africa⁵³ and the Middle East⁵⁴.

It is clear, then, that what these figures portray is far from being an 'information revolution', since they show a very complex scenario made of uneven distribution patterns and contradictory dynamics. To begin with, if compared to wealthier countries in the region, the numbers of Egypt are modest. If one combines them with its literacy rates⁵⁵, the result would provide enough evidence to suggest a more cautious approach to the so-called 'information revolution' in the Arab world. Indeed, the digital divide and the literacy rates represent two powerful arguments in the sceptics' hands. But it would be equally possible to draw a different scenario, for the very same figures might support a completely different account. However modest they may be, these numbers show a geometrical, exponential growth of the IT sector in the country.

This trend would become highly visible in the last decade, when Egypt climbed the rankings of specialized reports and analyses. From 2000 to 2012, the percentage of the Egyptian population accessing the cyberspace went from a mere 0.7 to 35.6%⁵⁶. From this perspective, the numbers about literacy in the country might lend themselves to another type of interpretation. While one third of the population above the age of 15 cannot read and write⁵⁷, the picture improves once youth literacy rates are taken into account, with almost 90% of the young between the age of 15 and 24 being able to read and write in 2010⁵⁸. Combined with the exponential growth of the IT sector, the literacy rates among young people might also suggest the emergence of different patterns of internet access. According to a survey made in 2008 by the Arab Advisor Group, ADSL connections shared among households and internet cafés are the preferred methods to access the web (Sutton 2008), with the mobile market reaching a stunning 100% of penetration rate in 2011⁵⁹.

More importantly though, this overview shows that, in order to explain the diffusion of digital technologies in Egypt, it is necessary to take into account the role played by the state. If one looks at the strategic vision implemented to boost the IT sector, the Egyptian state stands out as one of the main actors behind the informatization of the country. Since early 2000, the Egyptian government and its agencies took steps to liberalize the ICT market, partially privatize the state-owned Telecom Egypt while at the same time implementing programs to boost consumption,

52 <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm>

53 <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm>

54 <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm>

55 http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/egypt_statistics.html#90

56 <http://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm#eg>

57 <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.ZS/countries/EG?display=graph>

58 <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.1524.LT.ZS/countries/EG?display=graph>

59 <http://www.budde.com.au/Research/Egypt-Mobile-Market-Overview-Statistics-and-Forecasts.html?r=51>

ownership and usage. A 2010 report found that Egypt was “one of the leading Internet markets in Africa in terms of users, international bandwidth and services offered”, with more than 200 internet service providers (ISPs) and “some of the lowest prices for ADSL services on the continent”⁶⁰. Also, in 2002 the Minister of Communications and Information Technology (MCIT) launched the “PC for Every Home Initiative”, a two-phase project to increase the usage of computers and internet focusing on rural areas and limited income families. The second phase of this program started in 2008 and was implemented through a partnership with other public agencies and numerous private actors, in order to provide “integrated packages of PCs and 512 KB-speed ADSL subscriptions for three years”⁶¹.

Thus, in examining the emergence of blogospheres at both national and regional levels, it is necessary to keep the state at the centre of the picture, as the actor capable of producing the conditions under which such a phenomenon becomes possible. In this respect, it is not surprising to see new media such as blogs and social networks becoming part of the Egyptian mediascape during the same years. Although the initial experiments date back to the late 1990s (see Blood 2000; Jensen 2003), it is only between 2002 and 2007 that blogging platforms gain popularity, a trend sanctioned in 2003, when Google acquired Blogger.com from the Pyra Labs. As for the Arab world, the diffusion of weblogs would begin during the same years. According to Hofheinz, one of the first blogs in Arabic appeared in March 2004 and his author, Abdallah al-Miheiri, “is credited with having come up with the Arabic translation of 'blog' (*al-mudawwana*)” (in Sakr 2007a: 77). Indeed, the existence of a thriving Arab blogosphere would gain a modicum of popularity only between 2002 and 2004, when the international media discovered an anonymous Iraqi blogger, Salam Pax, who was chronicling the ordinary life during the war⁶².

In this regard, Egypt has been one of the leading blogging scenes both within and beyond the regional confines, with many of its young citizens at the forefront of this new phenomenon since its early days. Well before the Arab uprisings, individual and groups, small collectives and political parties, human rights associations and research centres had already established their online presence. According to a report published in 2008 by the Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC), the Egyptian blogosphere witnessed a first phase of expansion from 2004 to 2008, passing from only 40 blogs to an estimated 160,000. The report found that the majority of Egyptian blogs were written in Arabic (76.8%), with half of them being maintained by users between the ages 20 and 30⁶³. In this regard, if the state did play a crucial role in creating the legal and infrastructural

60 http://www.researchandmarkets.com/research/64a7a1/egypt_convergenc

61 http://www.mcit.gov.eg/MediaPressSer_Details.aspx?ID=1494&TypeID=1

62 http://dear_raed.blogspot.co.uk/

63 IDSC (Information and Decision Support Center) (2008). “Al- Mudawwanat al-Misriya: Fada' ijtimai' jadid” (Egyptian Blogs: A New Social Space). Originally available at: <http://www.idsc.gov.eg/upload/Publications/blogs>

condition for an Egyptian blogosphere to emerge, no less significant was that of other actors, such as early cyber-pioneers Alaa Abdel Fattah and the growing activist milieu.

Not only did the former create, together with his wife Manal Hassan, two blog aggregators (*Omraneya*⁶⁴ and *Manalaa*⁶⁵); he was also instrumental in launching Arabeyes, an Open Source community founded in 2001 and dedicated to Arabize interfaces, word processors and search engines⁶⁶. The growth of the Egyptian blogosphere also coincides with the beginning of a new cycle of struggles in early 2000s. From the protests in solidarity with the second Intifada (2000), through those against the second US invasion of Iraq to the waves of strike and mass protests initiated by Kefaya (2004/2005) a growing community of activists, participants and supporters started to maintain individual and collective blogs to report actions, discuss outcomes and future strategies (see Al Malky 2007; Radsch 2008). Since then, bloggers would become prominent actors in digital and traditional forms of political activism.

In this respect the best known examples are represented by We Are All Khaled Saeed (WAAKS) and the April 6 Youth Movement. Thus, it is useful to pause on them for a moment. The former was launched in the days following the brutal murder of Khaled Saeed (6th June 2010), it began campaigning against police brutality reaching 400,000 subscribers by 22nd January 2011 and called for a nation-wide protest on 25th January⁶⁷. WAAKS is actually composed of multiple media outlets, an official website⁶⁸ and two pages on Facebook: one in Arabic⁶⁹, which has now more than 3 millions of subscribers and the other in English⁷⁰ with around 400,000 members. The April 6 Youth Movement also emerged as a page on Facebook⁷¹, which has now more than 500,000 subscribers; it was launched in April 2008 to call a general strike in support of an upcoming protest in the industrial district of Mahalla (see Wolman 2008; 2011; Radsch 2008).

Both groups played a crucial role in the waves of mobilization leading to the revolution. Yet to credit Facebook for the ensuing events is highly problematic. For the very appearance of these two highly-profiled 'cyber movements' point to rather different conclusions. To begin with, their emergence show an interesting shared traits. Both groups were born online, as Facebook pages, but

%20final-2.pdf. For a summary of the report, see Michael, Meghan (2008). "Blogging on the rise in Egypt despite security risks, threats, says report". *Daily News Egypt*, 31 July.

Available at: <http://www.masress.com/en/dailynews/116300>

64 <http://www.omraneya.net/>. This website is accessible but no longer updated.

65 <http://www.manalaa.net/>

66 <http://projects.arabeyes.org/>

67 For a background story: <http://www.elshaheed.co.uk/2012/01/26/the-story-of-we-are-all-khaled-said-english-facebook-page-1-of/#more-479>. On the early organizational phases of the revolution, included an interesting chat between the leader of 6 April movement, Ahmed Maher, and the then anonymous author of We Are Khaled Saeed page on Facebook, Wael Ghonim, see Wolman (2011).

68 <http://www.elshaheed.co.uk/>

69 <https://www.facebook.com/ElShaheed>

70 <https://www.facebook.com/elshaheed.co.uk>

71 <https://www.facebook.com/shabab6april>

they could have not existed without a triggering event, a cause. Khaled Saeed was brutally murdered by the police, whereas the 6 April Youth launched its page in support of a cycle of protests initiated and led forward by the workers in Mahalla. To put it simply, there always is something real, brutally real, behind digital activism. The history of the 6 April Youth Movement constitutes a good example in this respect, as it provides empirical evidence against facile arguments about digital activism. After their success on April 6th, when thousands joined the page and the protests in the street, the movement called for a general strike on May 4th 2008, Mubarak's 80th birthday. Hossam el-Hamalawy, photo-reporter and leading figure of the Egyptian Revolutionary Socialist movement, did not endorse the call and wrote a short post to explain why:

I just want to state on the record from now that I DO NOT endorse the call for a general strike on May 4th. [...] This is a call that is coming from the cyberspace by bloggers, "Facebook activists" and the Islamist-leaning Labor Party whose leaders have declared themselves more or less as some "provisional govt" in cyber-exile... We, the Egyptian bloggers, have always prided ourselves on the fact that we have one foot on the ground and the other in the cyberspace... But this time, it seems some have thrown both their feet as well as brains in the cyberspace and are living some virtual reality, mistakenly believing (helped by the media sensationalist coverage of the "facebook activism") that they are the ones behind the events in Mahalla...⁷²

El-Hamalawy was right. The general strike was called but the call went largely unheeded by ordinary people and workers' groups involved in the Mahalla uprising. Contrary to the first mobilization attempt on April 6th -when many schools, university campuses and streets were empty due to the strike⁷³- the May 4th call was a total fiasco, in Cairo "it was business as usual with snarled traffic and busy commuters filling the streets" (Michael and Schemm 2008). A harsh reality check for the 6 April Youth Movement which, in less than two months, revealed both its potentialities as well as its limitations.

Another common aspect, worth being carefully considered, is that these digital collectives borrowed topics and practices from an already familiar repertoire of online activism. The 6 April Youth Movement was following, rather than leading, a working class cycle of protest that had already garnered support and popularity. One should also note that practices of digital activism were not at all the exclusive domain of liberal élites, for other political groups often have a much longer history of digital activism. Well before the birth of the 6 April movement, journalists and bloggers

72 El-Hamalawy, Hossam (2008). "I do NOT endorse the May 4th General Strike Call". *3Arabawy*, 24 April. <http://www.arabawy.org/2008/04/24/i-do-not-endorse-the-may-4th-general-strike-call/>

73 For an account of the 6 April events see El-Hamalawy, Hossam (2008). "Some notes on the Mahalla uprising". *3Arabawy*, 27 April. <http://www.arabawy.org/2008/04/27/some-notes-on-the-mahalla-uprising/>

such as Jano Charbel⁷⁴, Karim Elbehirey⁷⁵ and Hossam El-Hamalawy⁷⁶ had been maintaining blogs entirely dedicated to the provision of news, updates and commentaries about workers' struggles and unrest. The latter was, and still is, also instrumental in rejuvenating the communication strategy of the Egyptian Center for Socialist Studies⁷⁷. A good case in point here is We Are All Khaled Saeed. The subject and the way to advocate for it were known both within and outside the digital activist milieu, for police brutality torture and abuses constituted one of the first hot topics shedding light on the Egyptian blogosphere since at least 2005. The abuses of state authorities was being covered and exposed by a plethora of specialized weblogs, such as Tadamon Masr⁷⁸ or Torture in Egypt⁷⁹, as well as citizen journalists such as Wael Abbas⁸⁰, Demagh Mak⁸¹ and Malek X⁸². The latter would be instrumental in leaking online several compromising videos, including one showing a 21-year old minibus driver, Emad Kabir, being sodomized with a cane by the police⁸³.

While a comprehensive account of these groups and their practices falls beyond the scope of the present discussion, there are some key features that must be singled out. To begin with, it is clear that social movements contributed to the growth of a national blogosphere. Unable to find and establish common spaces elsewhere, let alone mainstream media coverage, social movements started territorializing the web with their online presences. A statement issued via an official website, a simple blogpost that provokes discussion, a video leaked online via forums or email and then circulated through social networks and their virus-like distribution patterns, each and all of these actions contribute to literally augment the size of the national cyberspace, while at the same time embedding more and more the use of digital technologies into the life of organization as well as individual users.

However, by going online these groups become enmeshed into highly complex webs of power relations. They might be, indeed, they routinely are subjected to digital surveillance by both state authorities and market agencies. By cultivating their online presences, not only do social movements actually contribute to the expansion of the cyberspace, but they also elicit parallel

74 <http://she2i2.blogspot.co.uk/>

75 <http://egyworkers.blogspot.co.uk/>

76 Although his blog, *3Arabawy* (<http://www.arabawy.org/>), starts on September 2006 it is important to note that he was first hosted by Issandr el Amrani at *The Arabist* (<http://www.arabist.net/>).

77 Visit the old website at: <http://www.e-socialists.net/>. The new website is accessible at: <http://revsoc.me/>

78 <http://tadamonmasr.wordpress.com/>

79 <http://tortureinegypt.net/>

80 <http://misrdigital.blogspot.com/>

81 <http://demaghamak.blogspot.co.uk/>

82 <http://malek-x.net/>

83 See El-Hamalawy, Hossam (2006). "New Egyptian police brutality video". *3Arabawy*, 31 December. <http://www.arabawy.org/2006/12/31/new-egyptian-police-brutality-video/>. For an account of compromising footages being leaked by bloggers see also Padania, Sameer (2006). "Egypt: Bloggers open the door to police brutality debate". *Global Voices Online*, 9 December. <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2006/12/09/egypt-bloggers-open-the-door-to-police-brutality-debate/>

adaptive mechanisms from other actors trying to control their actions. The mere fact of establishing a recognized official presence draws the attention of authorities, media practitioners and other political actors. State authorities, for example, must adopt techniques of digital surveillance and censorship; media practitioners must include as sources websites, forums and profiles on social networks while at the same time developing methods to track conversations, news and debates; other political actors, too, have the necessity to follow these dynamics, in order to break or build alliances and propose joint initiatives.

To put it briefly, it is clear that, rather than being a utopian frontier of absolute democracy, the cyberspace looks in fact as yet another political battlefield. To tackle such a complexity is indeed a daunting task. Under this light, the role being played by new media is to be assessed without losing sight of the diverse relations of power that work through and constitute them. Here one is confronted once again with the questions I posed at beginning. Granted they do not lead a revolution, what kind of political effects might new media be said to have? How can one conceive of the role they have been playing for contemporary social movements? I already argued that, as a concept, the archive might be helpful to address them. However, before explaining how, I first need to review how this phenomenon has been thus far approached.

Arab Media Studies: A Critical Review

When it comes to an assessment of its socio-political impact, the internet is either celebrated by an army of extremely well-placed *cyber-utopians*⁸⁴ for the bright future it promises, or hastily dismissed as the latest form of middle-class leisure by a growing current of equally well-placed *net deluded*s⁸⁵. This sort of grandiose, sweeping conclusions regularly feature in the coverage of mass protests, now occurring both within *and* outside western countries. One needs only to remember how many of the recent protest events were associated to some kind of technological device, which was in turn framed as the principal agent behind the event in question. For the 2011 riots in UK it

84 See Bell (1976), Benkler (2006), Kelly (2010) and Shirky (2009; 2011), though other key players should also be mentioned. The Clinton/Gore administration (1993-2001), for example, or the magazine *Wired*, were instrumental in launching and legitimizing the reconfiguration of US economy around information technologies. More recently, a plethora of journalists, pundits and commentators has rehearsed these techno-utopian arguments. The list far transcends national and regional confines. See for example Alavi (2005), Loewenstein (2008), Ghoneim (2012), Radsch (2012), Sullivan (2002) and Shapiro (2009). In the course of the argument I shall rely on the work of some scholars who approached the subject from a critical perspective. For further reading, the historical account of Schiller (1999) and the manual edited by Webster (2006) represent good entry points to the 'information society' debate.

85 See Carr (2008), Gladwell (2010a; 2010b), Keen (2007), Lanier (2010) and, last but not least, Evgeny Morozov. Morozov has gone from one end, celebrating Moldova's "Twitter-driven revolution" (2009a; 2009b; 2009c), to its opposite, becoming a widely acclaimed critic of what he terms "Net Delusion" (2011; 2012), an expression which, if anything, speaks volumes about the author's convictions.

was the Blackberry whereas many other protests -from Madrid to London and Cairo, from New York to Athens and Tunis- were driven either by Facebook or Twitter. Less recently, a wave of so-called 'Twitter-revolutions' had already swept other countries such as Moldova and Iran in 2009. Since 2000, well before the actual revolution, Egypt's cycle of unrest has been repeatedly reported as driven by bloggers first, then by either Twitter or Facebook. At the same time, we witnessed the rise of a specific subjectivity: that of the young, pro-(liberal) democracy cyber-activist. This “combination of youth and technology is driving a wave of change”, argued Fareed Zakaria from the pages of *Time Magazine* (2011). So persistent is this framing that one is tempted to follow the script and regard the XXIst century as the age of new media revolutions. It seems quite a catchy phrase, provided that one gets the bitter irony in it.

Yet such a debate is of little interest here⁸⁶. It is not my intention to establish whether the internet is revolutionary or useless, but to illustrate how these commentaries have in fact contributed to produce and prescribe the revolution they described. For “[e]xpert knowledge”, as Timothy Mitchell argues, “works to format social relations, never simply to report or picture them” (2002: 118). However, interesting as it might be, this topic falls well beyond the scope of the present chapter, whose main aim is to review the existing scholarship about Arab media.

This emergent interdisciplinary field, still in the process of being systematized, can offer adequate analytical antidotes to the daily media chatter. Indeed, it could be argued that the urgency to define it was dictated by the increasing interest in the diffusion of new media in the Arab world. It is important to note that the study of Arab media is not a novelty, for there now exists a body of scholarship that has concerned itself with the analysis of mass media, print and broadcasting channels. In the late 1950s, earlier analyses approached the subject through the lens of modernization theory. Within this paradigm, mass media were regarded as playing a crucial role in bringing development and modernity to the region. Once introduced into 'traditional' societies, so the argument goes, they prompt an inexorable process of secularization, democratization and liberation from the shackles of tradition, authoritarianism and backwardness⁸⁷. Also, given the burdensome apparatuses upon which mass media rely and the traditionally dominant role of the

86 For a brilliant rebuttal of both camps see Sreberny (2011a; 2011b), Sreberny and Khiabany (2010: Introduction; Ch. 1).

87 Here Siebert et al. (1956) is a foundational text yet, as far as the Arab world is concerned, a much more influential text is Daniel Lerner's. In *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (1958), Lerner unsurprisingly diagnoses the entire region with its chronic disease -namely, backwardness due to lack of secular enlightenment- and then prescribes western modernization as the only viable treatment. Quoting none other than G.E. Von Grunebaum, he declares Islam “absolutely defenseless” against the “rationalist and positivist spirit” brought about by modernization (1958: 45). In his view, modern mass media are entangled in a virtuous circle with modern societies: “modern media systems have flourished only in societies that are modern [...] no modern society functions efficiently without a developed system of mass media” (*ibidem*: 55). However, this is only one of the paradigms that has shaped the research concerned with the global expansion of media systems. For a complete overview see Curran and Park (2000: Introduction; Ch. 3) and Sparks (2007: Introduction).

state in developmentalist projects, the research framework was very much concerned with questions related to political economy and the nation-state (see Boyd 1977, 1999; Rugh 1979, 2004).

From the 1980s onwards the growing trend of media consumption prompted other disciplinary fields to become interested in the analysis of mass media from a cultural perspective. Anthropology, in particular, was one of such disciplines re-orienting its research agenda towards media production and consumption. With her studies on women's consumption of television programmes, Lila Abu-Lughod has not only demonstrated how the developmentalist and modernizing vision of the Egyptian state was articulated through/within popular culture but also its ambivalent results, which were very much the product of contextualized readings subjected to issues of class and gender (1989; 1993a; 1993b; 1995; 1997; 2004; 2006). Along the same lines, scholars such as Allen (2009), Armbrust (1996; 1998; 2000), Eickelman and Anderson (2003), and Starrett (1995a; 1995b; 1998; 1999; 2010) have shown the fundamentally contested and negotiated nature of modernity and secularism, while also revealing the mundane, and contemporary, dimension of religious cultural production and consumption. More recently, Charles Hirschkind has investigated the consumption of religious cassettes and noted how this “ethical landscape” constitute what he calls an “Islamic counterpublic” (2001; 2006).

Besides anthropology, a concern with culture, modernity and the everyday life is shared by a much more recent attempt to re-articulate the study of Arab societies. While not being very far from anthropology, for ethnography is in fact used as a research methodology, Tarik Sabry has called for translating the analytical toolbox developed mainly within the British tradition of cultural studies and apply it to the study of Arab societies and cultures (Sabry 2010, 2011). There is a growing body of scholarship that variously tackles the implications of emerging cosmopolitan media cultures (Khatib 2006; Kraidy 2005, 2008, 2009, 2010; Shohat and Stam 1994, 2003). A move away from descriptive accounts of big media systems also informs earlier attempts to examine the ways in which media were used as a tool of political dissent. Once again, the subject is anything but new, for even in a tightly controlled political landscape such as the Middle East media served in fact a wide variety of political agendas and groups. The use of “small media” such as cassettes or fax machines, has been crucial to set up underground networks for the circulation of Khomeini's speeches before Iran's 1979 revolution or dissenting arguments against the Saudi regime (Fandy 1999; Sreberny 1990,1994).

The broad socio-political implications brought about by the increasing diffusion of digital technologies such as satellite TV channels and the internet will come to occupy a central place within the study of Arab media. From the 1990s onwards, an impressive amount of publications begins to look at the changes which the advent of these technologies is prompting in the region.

Many of these works attempted to map and describe the new reconfiguration of the Arab media landscape in light of the emergence of private broadcasting channels (Ayish 2002, 2003a; Alterman 1998, 2004; Burkhart 2003; Sakr 1999, 2001). The rise of al Jazeera, in particular, was one of the determining factor behind the urgency to study Arab media systems. Although the democratic credentials of this channel are far from well established (see Fandy and Caesar 1989; Zayani 2005), its appearance generated high expectations within and outside the region (Lynch 2003, 2006; Nawawy 2002, 2003; Seib 2008). Moreover, other contributions concerned themselves with the study of the implications prompted by new Arab media both at the national and transnational level (see Ashuri 2010; Hafez 2000, 2001, 2007; Jamal 2003; Sakr 2007a, 2007b). This current of research is firmly located within the US tradition of journalism and political communication, and is informed and guided by analytical categories such as civil society and public sphere. It is possible to argue that, in the 1990s, there was a shift from the former to the latter, with Habermas' public sphere (1989) becoming the dominant paradigm through which the role of media is framed (see Anderson 2007; Ayish 2003b; Eickelman and Anderson 2003; Eickelman and Piscatori 2004; Eickelman and Salvatore 2002; Lynch 2003, 2006)⁸⁸.

However, while still enjoying a widely positive reception especially within journalism and political communication circles, Habermas' ideal-normative framework proved to be extremely problematic (see Dean 2003; Demirović 2004; Fraser, 1990; Gitlin in Curran *et al.* 1998: Ch. 10; Warner 2005), and, especially with regard to different historical contexts, many authors have in fact sought to either refine it or opt for alternative solutions (see Sreberny 2008: 16; Cunningham 2001; Matar 2007; Zayani 2008). I would also contend that the reliance on such analytical vocabulary not only overlooks the numerous blindspots of liberal theories of democracy, but also the ways in which such vision is reproduced while framing the accounts of socio-political phenomena sweeping the region. While political economy perspectives often yield descriptive accounts, mostly focused on big structures and players, the tradition of US political communication naturalizes and reproduces (western) liberal democratic understandings of politics and development. This tendency is particularly pronounced in the treatment of contemporary broadcast media, where satellite channels such as al Jazeera are often said to empower the public, enlarge the public sphere and foster dialogue. In other words, the development of a media-related private sector is seen as coincident with the liberalization of a (pre-supposedly) stagnant marketplace of ideas (see Lynch 2006; Nawawy and Iskandar 2002; 2003).

Corollary to that is a narrow conception of politics which accords exclusive preferences to

⁸⁸ There have recently been attempts to formulate an Islamic normative framework or a cultural theory, articulated in particular by Ayish (2003b) and Hamada (in Splichal 2000). For a rebuttal of these arguments see Khiabany (2007).

well-established political subjects, groups, institutions, discourses and practices. A narrow conception of the political⁸⁹ and an extremely formalist understanding of representative democracy often construct parliamentary politics and the nation-state as the only available options for doing politics. If one adds to that the way in which pluralism and hybridity often uncritically rehearse free-market ideology, one could argue that, rather than bringing freedom and democracy to the region, the rise of corporate media and much of the scholarship accompanying it has rather re-colonized the region with a newly-articulated western hegemonic view. What is excluded from this tunnel vision often finds a place within an equally water-proof cultural realm, where political and economic issues are conveniently set aside and various takes on such notions as identity and representation occupy much of the discussion.

Once the only term of comparison is state-owned media it is pretty easy to portray corporate media as 'free'. Yet such a tunnel vision occludes many other facets which nevertheless cannot be disentangled so easily. One could argue for example that “[o]bjectivity is [always] authority in disguise” (Fiske 1989: 194), even when it is al Jazeera championing it; one could also note that corporate media are all but distant from state authorities and dominant classes (Herman and Chomsky 1994: Ch. 1). More generally, it is highly misleading to treat the development of an Arab media industry without taking notice of broader neoliberal policies that not only generated disastrous socio-economic consequences by and large, but were also implemented by those very despotic regimes Arab societies were supposed to be liberated from. Needless to say, these regimes maintained their power precisely by doing this job⁹⁰. Sadly enough, none of this is visible through Habermas' eyes.

To some extent, these presuppositions are reproduced within the scholarship on Arab digital media. Although being more heavily informed by theories of new media and social movements, the enormous amount of commentary, analysis, papers and research appears to be located within the same disciplinary fields that have dominated the study of mass media. Together with accounts informed by political economy and quantitative research methods (see Abdullah 2005, 2006, 2007; Etling 2009; Kelly 2001, 2008; Onghia and Indelicato 2011), a journalistic approach dominates the analysis of the political implications of digital technologies which often uncritically reproduces liberal conceptions of democratic politics (Abdo 2007; Al Malky 2007; Beckerman 2007; Eltahawy 2007; Radsch 2008). The internet is said to foster the growth of a transnational civil society (Anderson 2007; Surman and Reilly 2003; Tan and Zawawy 2008;), expand the public sphere (Lynch 2003; 2007), liberalize the political landscape (Hofheinz 2005), constitute a platform where

89 I am here referring to Mouffe's distinction between politics and the political (2005: 8-34).

90 On the “paradoxical” nature of the state media-related projects see Khiabany (2006; in Maluf and Berenger 2007; 2009), Khiabany and Sreberny (2010: Ch. 3).

citizens are able to circumvent censorship and practice freedom of speech, citizen journalism or simply political activism for an unspecified social change (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2012; Faris 2010; Goldstein 1999; Gulvady 2009; Khamis 2012; Khamis and Vaughn 2011; Khater 2010; Osman 2008; Sohrabi-Haghighat 2011). Another current trend of research deals with cultural aspects of new media and is concerned with the ways in which different identities are expressed, represented or constructed online. Apart from historicizing and literary accounts (Doostdar 2004; Haughballe 2007; Ulrich 2009), such an approach has been used in particular to examine the articulation of national (Aouragh 2011; Humphries 2008; Iazzolino 2010) and religious identity (Abdel-Fadil 2011; Bunt 2000, 2003, 2009; Goh 2006; Ho *et al.* 2008; Moll 2010; Reid and Chen 2007; Samin 2008; Siapera 2010), youth cultures (Arvizu 2009; Elsayed 2010; Mahboub 2009; Melky 2010; Peterson 2011; Possing 2010; Sokol and Sisler 2010; Weyman 2007) and gender relations (Bernardi 2010; Ismail 2007; Piela 2011; Wassmann 2010).

More recently, this disciplinary field has become highly receptive of social movement theory, with volumes and papers examining the role of digital technologies through the analytical lenses provided by existing scholarship on social movements. In particular, the concept of network and those elaborated within the highly institutionalized research agenda of US social movement theorists -Political Opportunities Structures (POS), frame analysis, Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT)- appear to have hegemonized even the study of digital activism in the Arab world. While there is a research current which persistently frames such a phenomenon through various articulations of the public sphere (see Ajemian 2010), other contributions have attempted to deploy network theories (Faris 2008; 2009) or different combinations of concepts borrowed from social movement theory (Lynch in Hafez 2008: Ch. 1; Radsch 2008, 2012; Reese 2009; Richter in Hafez 2008: Ch. 3; Richter in Richter *et al.* 2010: 16-24; Siapera in *ibid.* 2010: 25-37).

Now, although a comprehensive critical assessment of such scholarship would be in order, not least for its hegemonic stronghold over virtually anything even slightly related to either social movements and/or new media in the Arab world, such a task nonetheless falls beyond the scope of both the present chapter and this research project. Therefore, while I do not dispute its validity on the whole, with the permission of Freedom House's attachés and Berkman Center's freedom of speech cyber-warriors, I would like to pursue a completely different path. For this scholarship has kept framing the issue of digital activism through state-centric analytical frameworks, treating the political not only as coincident of politics but also constituting it as a separate realm -from the social, the cultural and, most conveniently, the economic- thus uncritically reproducing and re-imposing upon social movements' political imagery western notions of liberal democracy.

What this research project argues for is a materialist account of digital activism, one that

tries to go beyond an obsessive concern for both state politics and culturalist analyses of media content, and instead attempts to historicize it while also revealing its exquisitely *productive* or *performative* dimension, as opposed to representational accounts. This line of argument is much closer to another recent contribution, whose object of study is the Iranian blogosphere. I am here referring to Sreberny and Khiabany's *Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran* (2010). In my view, this analysis has the merit of applying a radically historicizing perspective to the whole phenomenon (2010: Ch. 2), which is capable not only to reveal how Iranian social movements' engagement with media predates the advent of the internet but also to portray the whole phenomenon in its complexity, grasping both its paradoxical implications for the nation-state as well as causes, practices and potentialities for articulating dissent (*ibidem*: Ch. 1, 3). The blogosphere is tackled and described in its heterogeneity with single chapters being devoted to distinct niches, so to speak, related to issues of gender, diaspora, intellectual labour and citizen journalism (*ibidem*: Ch. 4, 5, 6 and 7). What is more, not only is the authors's analysis informed by Mouffe's theoretical reflections on how the political should be conceived of, but also by Bayat's theoretical reflections on everyday strategies of resistance.

It is in this spirit that I approach the subject of this research project and try to elaborate a framework equally capable of bringing into the picture all the different facets of the political practices connected to digital technologies, giving a place to cultural aspects as well social, historical and political context. Yet, however well intentioned this may sound, I must also recognize my limitations in terms of scope, knowledge, time and material resources. Hence, what I shall attempt with this research is the elaboration of a theoretical framework to define the role played by new media within contemporary social movements. Although the case studies will revolve around the communication strategies and practices adopted by the Egyptian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, I will nonetheless try to leave room for a possible, future development which will have a more general scope. Having explored the main debates and approaches on contemporary Arab media, I now proceed to elaborate a framework informed by the theoretical concepts discussed in the first chapter. I am well aware of the inherent risks of reproducing, albeit from a different angle, Eurocentric assumptions just as I am equally aware that theory does travel (Said 1983). For this is what anyone else does anyway. And if the only solution is to rehearse bedtime stories about liberal democracy, then this is a risk I am ready to take.

The Case for Archival Media

In the previous chapter, I specified that, while retaining a critical perspective, I nonetheless choose

to work within the framework elaborated by autonomist Marxism. The present section will then explore the possibility to include into it another concept, which in my view might be helpful in the study of new media. The rationale behind such a theoretical move is determined by the specific nature of the present objects of study -that is, websites or blogs. How can one apply the reflections on post-fordist labour in these cases? Granted that linguistic communication and material production now coincide, as Virno has it (2002), with the latter being objectivized into technical objects, how can one define such objects? How can one reveal not only the relations of power that shape them but also their significance in political terms? Is there a viable concept to define an emerging disciplinary field concerning itself with the study of social movements and digital activism?

Western scholarship has long been discussing different definitions for social movements' media: they have been defined radical (Downing 2001), alternative (Atton 2001), small (Sreberny 1994) and tactical (Garcia and Lovink 1997; Raley 2009). While not content with these definitions, I already noted that those provided by autonomist scholars can equally be further specified. Here, I adopt a less instrumentalist understanding of new media and choose something that would better render the fact that these are indeed machines, but that despite this they have something to do with language, knowledge and memory. In the treatment of autonomist theorists media are often characterized as “media machines” or “means of production” (see Pasquinelli 2011; Virno 2004), “media *dispositifs*” (Berardi in Coté 2011) or, much better from my perspective, as machines that “crystallize time” (Lazzarato 2007).

More recently, the first issue of *Interface*, a fresh and promising journal “for and about social movements”, contained a very interesting contribution of Mayo Fuster-Morell (see Cox and Flesher Fominaya 2009). With the entire issue being devoted to the theme of knowledge, and how movements produce it, Fuster-Morell identifies five specific tendencies developing within contemporary social movements: participative-collective methods of knowledge production, alternative content provision, developing strategic thinking, building connections and opening knowledge (*ibid.*: 24). Within these five tendencies, which all have to do in some way or another to knowledge production, she further specifies a list of practical experiences where this knowledge is put to work. These are characterized first of all by an active engagement of the researcher in political activism, by the creation of either techno-political tools, hubs for publication, creation of online communities, mapping for action and memory work (*ibid.*: 25).

While I commend this intuition, the term she employs (techno-political tools) is still inadequate. Just like autonomists' instrumentalist definitions, this term sounds too neutral to take into account the various relations of power that work through and by new media. Furthermore, it

misses a fundamentally empowering characteristic of new media, which is that of providing marginalized subjectivities the venue to actually produce knowledge, providing the material infrastructures through which one is able to elaborate it. Online, social movements are building their memories, out of which they then create knowledge. As a consequence, I would argue that what contemporary social movements are doing online is assembling digital archives. Looked under this light, then, what new media have to offer is not only the capacity to establish real-time connections in a horizontal and non-linear way, but also a set of techniques to store, process and spread information. The appropriation of the latter function by social movements and activists has, in my view, exquisitely political implications. Far from merely making claims to authorities or expressing identities, be they individual or collective, social movements produce knowledges about the contexts they inhabit. And just as the open source movement contest corporations' monopoly of information, social movements contest nation-states' monopoly of truth assembling their own archives, mnemonic institutions where they keep memory, produce knowledge and, ultimately, construct new regimes of truth.

Let me return for a moment on the opening section of this chapter, where I briefly outlined both a history and a tentative topology of actors and practices territorializing the Egyptian cyberspace. There, some common traits were singled out to formulate a critical assessment of potentialities as well as weaknesses of digital activism. Driven by the imperatives of contemporary knowledge-based societies, the state actually produced the conditions, both legal and infrastructural, for a thriving national cyberspace to emerge. Users, small groups and socio-political movements were also instrumental in developing this virtual environment, making it a venue for political dissent to be articulated. This dynamic was not detached from 'street politics', so to speak, but was instead dictated by it. A call to a general strike turns into complete failure once it does not and cannot resonate with its surrounding environment; the exposure of abuses of power can be easily silenced if no one is ready and willing to pick it up and disseminate it further. In other words, digital activism is not separated from street politics, they rather feed into each other.

However, blogging about a protest, denouncing an abuse of power, leaking a compromising video do not simply *represent* something occurred in reality. Quite the contrary, they frame or articulate the issue in question in a particular way. Not only is this always already a political act, but it becomes even more so in a context such as Egypt, where the 'red lines' of the public debate were tightly controlled by state authorities. In this regard, practices of blogging and digital activism reveal their fundamentally political significance. New media provided Egyptian social movements with a venue through which it became possible to expose things that were supposed to be secret, to utter unimaginable and unheard words, to record a different position or interpretation of a particular

event, to remember what was supposed to be forgotten or never happened. One only needs to recall some of the examples mentioned earlier on, especially the leaking of videos showing police brutality. Consigning the leaked footage to online networks, bloggers were able to actually create a political scandal which media and state authorities had no choice but to confront. Thanks to the viral circulation of these videos, the subject of police abuses of power gained a critical mass that started pressuring on them, even before any mainstream media outlet would pick up the subject.

The list of similar examples would be endless here, but one in particular needs to be mentioned. In October 2006 during the Eid, the holiday marking the end of Ramadan, in downtown Cairo groups of men started waves of mass sexual harassment, with women barely able to seek refuge inside local shops. Some bloggers were nearby, rushed to the scene and started documenting everything. With the help of Wael Abbas, Malek Mustafa, aka Malek X, posted an account⁹¹ on his blog receiving 750 comments. Indeed, as Sandmonkey would report, it soon became clear that both state-owned and private mainstream media were unwilling to cover the incident:

I called my father when I heard of that happening, and he informed me that he didn't hear of it at all. They watched Al Jazeera, CNN, flipped through opposition newspapers, and nothing. Nada. Nobody mentioned it. As if it didn't happen. [...] It seemed like there was some consensus of just not reporting it and maybe it will just go away. What at first seemed like a conspiracy got later on confirmed by my sources in the news media. Al Jazeera had taped the incidents but were forbidden to air it at the request of the Egyptian authorities. The editor at a leading newspaper refused to touch it with a 6 foot pole. This was going to be one of those incidents that only the blogosphere would talk about, while the mainstream media ignored.⁹²

Malek's blogpost received nearly 60,000 visits in a week, while other similar accounts were appearing in the blogosphere. The event started circulating online mutating into a PR nightmare for state authorities and a delicate subject for media to cover. The taboo would be violated when Nawara Negm, presenter at Dream Channel, decided to report the story on her show (see Al Malky 2007). It is then impossible to deny the fact that, without activists gathering a critical mass around such an event, it would have gone completely unnoticed, unreported and eventually forgotten. It is in cases such as the Eid incident that digital activism demonstrates its productive, constituent power. It lies in the capacity of producing information, and then consigning it to social networks whose functioning allows not simply to circumvent censorship or facilitate access to media channels; in this case an event discussed solely online was able to impose itself onto the agenda of mainstream media.

91 Mustafa, Malek (2006). "Su'ar wust el-madina al jinsiyy". *Malek X*, 25 October. Available at: <http://malek-x.net/node/268>

92 Salem, Mahmoud (2006). "The Eid sexual harassment incident". *Rantings of a Sandmonkey*, 30 October. Available at: <http://www.sandmonkey.org/2006/10/30/the-eid-sexual-harassment-incident/>

It is also important to note that the forms of digital activism practiced by Egyptian bloggers were not limited to influencing the agenda of mainstream media or lobbying parliamentary groups. Other examples show the relevance of Mayo Fuster-Morell's insights on the relationship between contemporary social movements and digital technologies. What characterized the engagement of Egyptian activists with the internet was a deployment of knowledge and skills devoted not only to the creation of “techno-political tools”, as Fuster-Morell would have it, but also to the production of subaltern knowledge and regimes of truth.

A good case in point here is represented by *Piggipedia*⁹³. This is a collaborative project created in 2008 by a pool of activists such as Hossam El-Hamalawy, Wael Abbas and Noha Atef, who launched and maintained the blog called *Torture in Egypt*. *Piggipedia* was initially intended as a repository profiling the personnel of the Ministry of Interior involved in cases of torture and violent repression of dissent. The project has now been updated to include Army personnel and their crimes during and after the 18 days of the revolution. Here is how one of its founder, Hossam El-Hamalawy, motivates the choice of profiling police and army personnel:

In every single event, demonstration or strike we have to snap at least one photo of the police officers, corporals, and plainclothes thugs present. We have to profile them, put their faces on the web and circulate their photos. [...] A State Security officer cannot spend the day electrocuting the balls of a detainee and inserting a stick up someone else's ass and then just simply go out in the weekend with his kids to the park peacefully, or have shisha in a public coffee shop, while those around think of him as a “normal” human being. These are dangerous torturers and rapists whom we do not want as neighbors or friends. They have to be exposed in front of their children, parents, neighbors and peers. Their pictures have to be everywhere, from the internet to the streets.⁹⁴

Clearly, then, rather than being a space of self-expression to discuss mundane issues, the blogosphere was instead populated by small collectives and individuals who aimed at using it politically. Blogs and social networks -Flickr, in this case, is a platform to post and share pictures- were *politicized*, becoming “techno-political tools”.

Yet, in such a neutral, instrumentalist definition something is missing. In my view, what renders truly political the use of new media is that necessity to make public something that is not, to tell the untold and remember the forgotten. It is precisely this contention, between the movements and the regime, over publicity, memory and, ultimately, truth that has rendered so crucial the role of new media. What was deployed, in different ways, as a political weapon was the capacity of new media to record, store, manage and circulate information, in turn connected to the ability to produce

93 <http://www.flickr.com/groups/piggipedia/>

94 El-Hamalawy, Hossam (2008). “Piggipedia on Flickr”. *3Arabawy*, 8 October. Available at: http://www.arabawy.org/2008/10/08/piggipedia_flickr/

different forms of knowledge. Under this light, then, digital activism can be understood as an open-ended, experimental process of re-appropriation, at both the infrastructural and linguistic levels, of the contemporary apparatuses tasked with the production of knowledge. I argue that it is possible to employ a different name to define them. Rather than sticking to machinic or instrumentalist definitions such as tools or machines, here it is through the concept of archive that the relationship between contemporary social movements and new media will be understood and examined. Social movements create archives of their own history, they read against the grain the archives of other institutions or remember what was arbitrarily removed from them.

One can then venture to define *archival* the role played by digital media, or simply rephrase Gil Scott Heron and argue that *the revolution will be archived*. Online, activists and social movement organizations assemble digital archives through which they are able to represent themselves, call to action, frame issues and problems, produce truth-claims and evidences, elaborate arguments and critiques, tell forgotten, erased, silenced or hidden stories. It is as if through digital technologies these processes were given an institutional semblance, or a public dimension. Here one discovers a whole new political dimension of new media, which seems to be not so much real-time communication as their capacity to *capture* information, to *record* it. And keeping memory, as we shall see, is never an innocent act, but a fundamentally political one.

The line of argument followed here partly emerges in reaction to hermeneutic approaches to media. British sociologist Nicholas Gane aptly labeled “media materialism” this new current in media theory, as it privileges the “material structures of technology over the meanings of these structures and the messages they circulate” (Gane 2005: 25). Authors such as Tiziana Terranova and Friedrich Kittler have both tried, albeit in differing ways, to articulate a materialist approach to the study of information. While the former conceives of information as a “material force” producing an “informational milieu” within which we now live and articulate cultural politics (Terranova 2004a: 9), the latter goes even further and argues in fact that information *is* matter. Information, according to Kittler, is “transformed into matter and matter into information” (1997: 126). One of the most fundamental implications is that the question of meaning - the semantic mode of existence of information - recedes back and becomes secondary. As Wellberry points out, Kittler's approach to media analysis can be defined as “post-hermeneutic”, for media:

are not mere instruments with which ‘man’ produces his meanings; they cannot be grounded in a philosophical anthropology. Rather, they set the framework within which something like ‘meaning’, indeed, something like ‘man’, become possible at all.

(in Kittler 1999: xii)

Such a materialist understanding of information leads Kittler to rethink the role of media, placing their storage capacity at the center of his research. Rather than being instruments for the communication of messages, media are better understood as storage devices capable of recording and processing information. As such, media “determine what in fact can become a discourse” (Kittler 1990: 232). In reviewing Kittler's approach, Gane argues that, from this perspective, media could be said to play the role of a “technical a priori” (2005: 29). In other words, they constitute the technological infrastructure that makes the appearance of any discourse possible.

As a consequence, I argue that the concept of archive becomes a viable theoretical concept for the study of practices of political communication performed by contemporary social movements. Traditionally regarded as a repository of documents, the archive attracted scholarly attention during the late 1990s, when the journal *History of the Human Sciences* devoted to two issues to explore its analytical potentialities as a theoretical concept (see Manoff 2004: 11). The field of colonial historiography has been particularly receptive and instrumental in elaborating this shift. But the works of Foucault and Derrida on the subject were foundational, for they were the first to assign theoretical dignity, so to speak, to the archive. Despite some differences, both scholars conceived it as inextricably connected to notions power and authority.

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), Foucault argues that discursive formations are all characterized by a degree of positivity, playing the role of *historical a priori*. The historical a priori is a “condition of reality for statements”, that which “characterizes [their] unity throughout time, and well beyond individual *oeuvres*, books, and texts” (*ibid*: 143). The resulting domain of statements is regulated, according to Foucault, by a system of laws that controls the appearance of true statements and the formation of discourses. Such system is what he defines as the *archive*:

The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events [...] is that which at the very root of the statement-event, and in that which embodies it, defines at the outset *the system of its enunciability* [...] defines the mode of occurrence of the statement-thing; it is *the system of its functioning* [...] differentiates discourses in their multiple existence and specifies them in their own duration [...] reveals the rules of a practice that enables statements both to survive and to undergo regular modification. It is *the general system of the formation and transformation of statements*.

(*ibidem*: 145-146)

Here Foucault uses the notion of archive in a rather figurative sense, conceiving it as a conceptual device serving as a system governing the existence of statements and discursive formations. However, the archive can also be seen in rather different terms, as a physical space where documents and texts are preserved.

This is closer to Derrida's view of the concept. In *Archive Fever*, Derrida investigates the connection between archival technologies and human memory, focusing in particular on the effects of electronic mailing systems (1996). Before delving into this topic, however, he provides an etymological analysis of the word, tracing its original meaning back to ancient Greece. In doing so, Derrida claims that such a notion is intimately connected to political power. Indeed, the term "archive" for Derrida derives its meaning from the Greek word *arkheion*:

[T]he meaning of "archive," its only meaning, comes to it from the Greek *arkheion*: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded. The citizens who thus held and signified political power were considered to possess the right to make or to represent the law. [...] they [the *archons*] have the power to interpret the archive [...] the hermeneutic right and competence.

(*ibidem*: 2)

Rather than a discursive device, then, Derrida's archive is a physical space where documents are stored and guarded by a distinct social class - the Greek magistrates called *archons*. In the figure of the *archons*, he detects the intimate connection between political power and the archive. By virtue of their position, those who controlled the archive held a different set of powers. Not only were the *archons* in charge of guarding the place and preserving the integrity of the documents contained in it, thus regulating its access and publicity; they also had the right to interpret those documents. The *archons* exercised what Derrida calls the *archontic power*: the right to "speak the law" (*ibidem*). Moreover, such hermeneutic authority over the archive was accompanied by the power of *consignation*:

By consignation, we do not only mean [...] the act of assigning residence or of entrusting so as to put into reserve [...] but here the act of *consigning* through *gathering together signs*. [...] *Consignation* aims to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration. [...] The archontic principle of the archive is also a principle of consignation, that is, of gathering together.

(3)

Like Foucault, then, in Derrida the archive emerges as a crucial point of intersection between power and knowledge. Unlike Foucault, Derrida provides the concept with a material dimension embodying such an intersection. Yet these two understandings are neither inconsistent nor incompatible, for they simply reflect a conceptual ambiguity intrinsic to the notion itself. Featherstone points out that the archive can be used "as a paradigmatic entity as well as a concrete institution" (2006: 596), as it can refer to either the place where documents are stored or the textual body of which it is composed. According to Derrida, this ambiguity can be explained by returning

to the original Greek concept of *arkhē*, which itself names two principles at once. The first principle, *commencement*, is ontological and indicates “*there* where things *commence*”; the second principle is nomological and indicates “*there* where men and gods *command*, *there* where authority, social order are exercised, *in this place* from which *order* is given” (Derrida 1996: 1). Subsequent formulations have positively received this feature, and the concept was employed by disciplines such as postcolonial and media studies.

These two conceptions would be taken on board for the two volumes of *History of Human and Social Sciences*. Archival science became archival theory. Not surprisingly, among those theorists who responded to the challenge launched by the journal there were many from both postcolonial theory and media studies. The former found in it a useful ally to explain the working of colonial domination achieved, as Said has shown (1978; 1994; 1997), through the production of knowledge about colonized subjects. The field of postcolonial studies, in particular, has demonstrated that the archive is not only a useful conceptual device, but also a fundamental instrument of power and domination. Ann Stoler urged her colleagues to change their understanding of the archive, moving “from archive-as-source to archive-as-subject” and seeing colonial archives “not as sites of knowledge retrieval, but of knowledge production” (2002: 87). Since archives are constituted through historical processes, they are sites of political struggles involving both material and symbolic manifestations of power. Colonial archives, in her words, “were both sites of the imaginary *and* institutions that fashioned histories as they concealed, revealed, and reproduced the power of the state” (*ibidem*: 92). Thomas Richards places the archive at the centre of his analysis of British colonial domination in India. In *Archive and Utopia*, he defines Victorian England as “one of the first information societies in history”, because it charged “a variety of state facilities with the special task of presenting and representing the conditions and possibility of comprehensive knowledge, thus the operational field of projected total knowledge was the archive” (Richards 1992: 104). As such, he argues that the archive both epitomized and actualized British control of colonial territories, for it was deployed as “an apparatus for controlling territory by producing, distributing, and consuming information about it” (*ibidem*: 108).

As far as media theorists are concerned, many of those interested in the concept applied to the analysis of new media. Cultural theorists like Featherstone (2000; 2006) and Lynch (1999) found in the archive a sort of paradigmatic concept to interpret the production and consumption of popular media. What they underline is a process of seeming democratization of archives: what was once an exclusive domain of states and established institutions is now being provided to ordinary users, who can construct their own everyday archives (see Featherstone 2006: 595). Lev Manovic sees in the archive one of the main symbolic form of contemporary digital media. Opposing it to the

book, Manovic argues that a website is an archive insofar as it does not follow a linear narrative, is socially constructed, is ephemeral and so on (1999; 2002: 194-212). Other theorists have followed this lead or hinted at it. Mark Poster, for example, speaks of the centrality acquired by the database in an information age, while defining as the ultimate articulation of panoptical power (1990: 73-98; 2006). As I hope to illustrate in the following chapters, which will apply the concept to cases of study, as a theoretical concept the archive is well equipped to trace relations of power constituting not only media outlets, in terms of editorial practices and values, but also the subjects who produce them.

Conclusion

The present chapter examined the development of the IT sector in Egypt, noting the role of different players contributing to growing penetration of digital technologies in the region. As noted by Sreberny and Khiabany while discussing the Iranian cyberspace (2010), the Egyptian state, too, occupies the paradoxical condition of implementing policies aimed at augmenting internet penetration, while at the same time, the very same measures produce the conditions for the emergence of a politicized blogging scene, created by net pioneers and activists who territorialized the cyberspace with alternative media outlets.

The growing media activism of militant bloggers attracted the interest of both mainstream media and academic circles. The study of digital technologies contributed to enrich the scholarship on Arab media studies. Just like social movement theory, this nascent field of research has a rather complex genealogy. The US tradition of political communication and British cultural studies have a strong influence. Having reviewed the main theoretical approaches elaborated within this disciplinary area, I then proceeded to include a perspective informed by autonomist Marxism, discussed in chapter one. However, despite the scholarly interest on new media and digital technologies, I find that the instrumentalist conceptualization of media -as 'machines', or 'tools'- can be further refined.

In order to do so, I suggest to employ the concept of archive to define the role played by digital technologies used by contemporary social movements. Though the concept was initially developed within literary studies, in late 1990s it was used as an analytical tool in both postcolonial and media studies. By referring to a crucial power/knowledge institution, the concept of archive retains an analytical focus on power relations traversing and constituting both digital technologies and their users. Also, as an object endowed with material life, the archive is well equipped to capture the way in which media are cultivated, worked upon and ultimately constructed by the

labour of subjects who are in turn constituted by this engagement. Thus, having articulated this theoretical argument, the following chapters will apply it to a selection of media outlets launched by the Muslim Brotherhood. However, before doing so, the political trajectory of the Muslim Brotherhood needs to be placed within the broader historical context.

Chapter 3

Mahzoura: Historical Background of The Muslim Brotherhood

The present chapter provides a historical background of the Egyptian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). The account concentrates on the relationship between the state and the group and follows its unfolding from the birth of the movement to our days. The first section deals with the birth of the Muslim Brotherhood and its growth, concluding with the wave of repression launched by Gamal Abdel Nasser (1928-1954). After two decades of harsh repression, the Ikhwan would undertake a major process of ideological revision. Under Sadat the Brothers gradually resumed their socio-political activities, while also benefiting from the climate set by Sadat's economic policies (*infitah*). Sadat's years in fact paved the way for further and greater exploits under Mubarak. The latter would adopt a highly ambivalent attitude towards the movement, oscillating between repression and cautious openings.

This relationship has been framed in various ways. For some it was a contest for political legitimacy, with each party gaining it for confronting the other ('Awadi 2005). Bayat argues instead that political Islam is becoming post-Islamist, striving to marry Islam with democracy and modernity (2007; 2010). But political Islam does not meet democracy as such, but a specific historical articulation of it. And if one defines better the contours of such an encounter, it is possible to see that it takes place under the neoliberal logic of exception. Against this broader historical and geopolitical background, it is also possible to see the complexity and conflictual dynamics shaping the political trajectory of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Indeed, the Ikhwan were not engaged solely on the domestic front but also reached out a loose, transnational network of think tanks, research institutions and specialized publications. This would also mark the beginning of a complex engagement with media and digital technologies. Banned from traditional channels, in the late 1990s the Ikhwan launched their first websites. But the strategy backfired. The engagement with digital technologies -so helpful in circumventing the restrictions imposed by the regime- also facilitated the emergence of different voices from within the organization.

1928-1954: From the Formative years to the short honeymoon with Nasser

Founded in 1928 in the city of Isma'iliyya by Hasan al-Banna⁹⁵, in few years the Society of the Muslim Brothers (MB) became a powerful and deeply-rooted organization. Its main objectives were the provision of social services and the promotion of an Islamic system of values. In 1932, al-Banna was transferred to Cairo and merged his newly founded organization with the Society of Islamic Culture, led by one of his brothers, Abd al-Rahman. The group rapidly established a complex network of schools, gyms, small industries and welfare activities. Mitchell notes that the Society of the Muslim Brotherhood grew so rapidly that its membership was “virtually representative of every group in Egyptian society” (Mitchell 1969: 12-13).

While Mitchell's account remains one of the key texts on the Muslim Brotherhood, other works addressed some of its lacunae. Between the 1930s and 1950s, the organization could count on 2,000 branches and between 300,000 and 600,000 members. Mitchell acknowledges such a remarkable growth but fails to explain how this popular support was achieved. What were the conditions enabling the success of this movement? To address such a question, Norwegian historian Brynjar Lia elaborated an account of the formative years of the Society precisely to fill what he perceived to be a weakness in Mitchell's account (Lia 2006: 1). His contribution divides the early years of the MB into three different stages, thus providing a more detailed view: the birth of a community constituted around the charismatic leadership of its founding figure Hasan al-Banna (1928-1931); the transformation from a community into a movement (1931-1936); the emergence of a mass movement (1936-1942). Lia's analysis echoes the argument put forward by Sami Zubaida who, contrary to oft-repeated arguments portraying the Brotherhood as an inherently backward-looking political force, argues instead that Islamism is the first modern political force in Egypt (Zubaida 1993: 50).

In doing so, Lia's account assigns a modicum of political agency to the Ikhwan without neglecting the relevance of social, political and economic factors. State-centred and political economic approaches often explain the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood in terms of propitious external elements, yet they fail to explain why the Ikhwan in particular were successful while other movements were not. By focusing on processes of outreach and institutionalization, Lia is able to provide a more coherent framework for the Society's resilience and appeal.

In this respect, recent scholarly contributions drawing on social movement theory provide significant insights. Ziad Munson (2001) has reviewed the years marking the apex of Ikhwan

⁹⁵ For further readings on the figure of Hasan al Banna see Abdo (2002), Ashour (2009: 34-41), Kramer (2009), Lia (2006), Mitchell (1993: Ch. 1, 2, 3), and Zollner (2009: 9-16).

mobilizational capacity (1930-1950), relying on newly-released historical evidence and resource mobilization theory. His study supports Lia's key argument and enriches the scholarship concerned with the study of social movements. Having reviewed the literature on political Islam, Munson concludes that approaches reliant on strains and/or resource mobilization are inherently unable to explain why the movement established by the Ikhwan was successful whereas others followed different paths. The concept of Political Opportunity Structure (POS), in particular, seems to be fundamentally challenged by the trajectory of the Muslim Brotherhood. If observed closely, Munson argues, the Society emerges when “[s]tate repression was actually increasing”, they had “no access to the political system” nor “support from any segment of the élite” (Munson 2001: 494).

Munson argues that, if one wants to understand the success of the Muslim Brotherhood, one then needs to concentrate on the ways in which their ideology was put at work within the organizational structure. In his view, the emergence and resilience of this organization are the results of the ways in which its ideological outlook was operationalized and institutionalized through a deeply-rooted structural and organizational arrangement. Two distinct features, a networked system of branches and a three-tier membership structure, are regarded as fundamental for the reproduction of authority and communication lines, preservation of the central structure from harsh repressive cycles, and adaptation to the changing configuration of social, cultural, political and economic forces in which the group was embedded. Here is how Munson puts it:

The Muslim Brotherhood [...] was different things to different people-fighter for the poor in poverty-stricken rural areas, or voice for democracy within educated urban neighborhoods. This kind of ideological nimbleness was facilitated by its federated structure [...]. [...] Traditional social networks were maintained and incorporated into the individual branches of the group, allowing the Muslim Brotherhood to gain access to lines of communication and commitment originally developed outside of the organization [...]. [...] The system of branches helped the Muslim Brotherhood maintain its organizational strength during periods of state repression. The Society keeps lines of communication and authority open to different branches in order to protect the larger organization from periodic government crackdowns, police raids, mass arrests, and infiltration by the state security apparatus[.]

(Munson 2001: 498)

In contrast to conventional accounts, a proper historicization of the Muslim Brotherhood allows us to fully comprehend both their engagement with contemporary historical forces as well as to reveal its internal dynamism and potential sites of conflicts and contradictions. From a community centred around its charismatic leader, the group first evolved into a popular movement and then one of the first mass movement in the history of Egypt. Between the late 1940s and mid-1950s, the Society would come to play a crucial role in Egyptian political landscape. The

organization consolidated its cadres and created a military wing with a Secret Apparatus (*Nizam al-Khass*)⁹⁶. This power was first tested in 1948 during in the Palestine conflict, where the Brothers were providing supplies to Egyptian soldiers and in Cairo, lobbying the then prime minister Nuqrashi to send more troops. Such a display of force eventually resulted in Nuqrashi issuing a decree that outlawed, for the first time, the organization (Mitchell 1993: 58). This event has to be seen in the larger historical and political context, where violence kept spiraling from the 1945, and the MB secret apparatus was one of the actors involved. A political struggle where two great mass movements, the Wafd and the Muslim Brothers, were fighting each other and against a delegitimized ruling elite. Mitchell notes that those years would signal “the breakdown of parliamentary life” and “the revolution of 1952” (1993: 59). This spiral of violence culminated with the killings of Nuqrashi in 1948 and al-Banna in 1949, thus paving the way the Free Officers' military coup that eventually led Gamal 'abd el Nasser to power.

On 12th January 1950 the Wafd won the elections and established a new government. For the outlawed Society this was a positive occurrence, since the Wafd had traditionally regarded it as “a bulwark against the left”. Martial law was abolished the ban on the Society lifted. Meanwhile, following the death of Hasan al-Banna, Hassan al-Hudaybi became General Guide of the Ikhwan and began to distantiate the movement from political violence. Yet the Society's existence was bound to end soon, once again. A military coup led by the 'Free Officers' forced King Faruk I to abdicate and installs General Muhammad Naguib as the first President of Egypt. The Muslim Brothers welcomed the new government: the connections and ideological affinity between the Free Officers and the Brotherhood are well documented. However, despite the initial atmosphere of cooperation, after an assassination plot from which Gamal Abdel Nasser escaped unharmed, the “short honeymoon” came to an end. In January 1954, the Society of the Muslim Brothers was once again dissolved and another crackdown began. Abdel Nasser declared the Brotherhood to be *mahzoura*: banned, restricted from Egypt's political life.

It was more than just a definition. The condition of being restricted, banned from the political life of the country will accompany the movement until Mubarak's demise in February 2011, while affecting its relationship with the subsequent governments of the Egyptian state. This lack of political legitimacy, and the ambition to change such a condition, not to be banned anymore, is a

96 The establishment and function of the Secret Apparatus (*Al Nizam al-Khass*) is a controversial aspect of the movement, and much has been written about the Brotherhood's engagement with political violence, armed struggle and its dubious connections with western authoritarian regimes. This aspect has often served the agenda of orientalist, neocons and Islamophobes, who used it to frame the Ikhwan as an inherently violent and despotic force reminiscent of, and in fact connivent with, the dark side of Europe. However, since such an argument falls well beyond the scope and purpose of the present chapter, here I shall not deal with it. For further readings on this subject see Achcar (2009; 2010), Ashour (2009: 33-44), Lia (2006: 162; 177-181), Mitchell (1993: 35-79).

recurrent theme and informs the group's political horizon. Nasser's years will usher the movement in a new and equally crucial phase for its evolution. Having banned the movement from Egypt's political life, Nasser launched a harsh cycle of repression, persecutions, arbitrary arrests, detentions and tortures against the Brothers. It was an almost fatal blow that dismantled what the group had resumed to build no later than few years earlier, while at the same time emboldening radical elements who were following the political project envisioned by Sayyid Qutb⁹⁷. His political thought will become a fundamental ideological resource for Islamist groups such as al-Gama'ah al-Islamiyya and Jihad, whose strategy and tactics would later be globalised by the transnational Islamist network known as al Qaeda⁹⁸.

However, the late 1960s were crucial for the evolution of the Brotherhood. In those years, the Society went through a comprehensive process of reformation which eventually led it to a profound revision of its ideological and strategic outlook. A new generation of leaders slowly re-entered the socio-political realm; the Society distanced itself from Qutb's ideological perspectives and opted instead for a more “cautious reinterpretation of the ideas of founder al Banna” (El-Ghobashy 2005: 374). Sadat allowed the Society to resume its socio-political activism and reconstitute once again its organizational structure. During the 1970s the group will start making huge inroads into main political groupings such as students associations and professional syndicates, something that will later allow them to enter the parliament despite being still considered an illegal political force.

1954-1973: The re-birth of an Islamist movement under The President believer

The period going from 1954 to 1973 marks the beginning of a new course for the Muslim Brotherhood. After Nasser's wave of repression and torture under Nasser, and the nefarious outcomes of political violence, members and leading figures started elaborating a new ideological outlook. In this respect, the works of two scholars are particularly useful since they focus precisely on this crucial phase, albeit investigating two distinct aspects.

97 For further reading on Sayyid Qutb see Calvert (2010), Euben (1995; 1997a; 1997b), Haddad (1983), Khatab (2002), Nayed (1992), Nettler (1994), Qutb (1970; 1993), Shepard (1989; 1992; 2003). It is important to remember that, although springing from within the Ikhwan, Qutb's work and successive implementations of his vision have always been of marginal relevance for the whole movement which, especially from the 1970s onwards, would instead undertake a quite different and gradualist approach to political action. Hasan al-Banna's successors would devote their efforts to distantiate the group from takfirist and radical groups. For further readings on this subject, see Ashour (2009: 90-109), Zollner (2007; 2009).

98 The radical currents of Islamism have by now a distinct history and should be seen as contenders of the Ikhwan, rather than their allies. See Ashour (2009: 33-60; 90-109), Cooley (2000), Ibrahim (1980; 1982; 1988), Kepel (1985; 1995; 2002; 2005), Kepel and Milelli (2008), Khosrokhavar (2005: Ch. 3), Meijer (2009: 19), Moghadam (2009: 46-51).

Barbara Zollner has produced a detailed analysis of the work of leading figures who reconsidered their positions during the detention. The scholar assesses the political positions of Qutb and other leading figures elaborated during and after their detention, and also produces an analysis of *Du'at la Qudat* (Preachers not Judges) by Hasan al-Hudaybi. The latter text is often indicated as foundational for the reformation of the Muslim Brotherhood. Zollner's work, in this respect, represents an important addendum because conventional scholarship has so far concerned itself with the writings of Hasan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb, whereas she concentrates instead on a figure who is credited for providing an indirect refutation of Qutb's *takfiri* discourse (Zollner 2009: 149). However, while Zollner's contribution does fill a historiographical gap, the ideological revision alone does not explain the successful outcome of the reform process.

A focus on how it has affected the organization and its structure is the primary concern of another work dedicated to this crucial historical phase. Drawing on social movement theory, Omar Ashour examines the political trajectories of various Islamist groups in North Africa, Egypt and Algeria in particular. In doing so, he suggests that both radicalization and de-radicalization are processes that need to be conceptualized and examined. Ashour argues that, from 1951 to 1973, the Muslim Brotherhood initiated three attempts of de-radicalization and that only the latter was successful insofar as violence was abandoned “behaviorally, organizationally, as well as ideologically” (Ashour 2009: 87)⁹⁹. Parallel to the radicalization of some groups, then, by early 1970s the Muslim Brotherhood would largely embrace a reformist and participatory political agenda. With Sadat in power the Brothers were allowed once again back into society, launching the Ikhwan into the national political space.

Indeed, the 1967 war inflicted a military defeat that had even more destructive consequence on a symbolic level. Nasserism, the model of Arabism nationalism, was crumbling down. When Sadat came into power, he reconfigured the political and institutional arrangements so as to counter the most threatening competitors: Nasser's legacy and leftist movements. He also inaugurated the period of economic reforms (*infatih*) to bolster the private sector and open the country to the foreign capital. Furthermore, he chose to project his public persona with an attention to piety and religious observance and to make a decisive move towards the institutionalization of Islam. Thus, the “president believer”, as he was called, re-allowed also the Muslim Brotherhood into the socio-political space and deploy a religious discourse to counter the influence of letists and Nasserists. In doing so, he would create the climate in which the Brothers will lay the foundations for their subsequent political performances. This result will also be determined by their tireless activism, carried out primarily in university students associations, and later in professional syndicates and

⁹⁹ For a critical appraisal of the concept of radicalization see Kundnani (2012).

trade unions. As Abdo recognizes, the so-called Islamic revival is very much due to the diffusion of the group:

The religious revival at the universities was influenced to some extent by leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood. In the 1970s, Sadat released many of the Brothers who had been imprisoned under Nasser a decade earlier. Once again they focused their efforts on the universities, as they had done so effectively in the 1940s. Mosques became the favored venue for regular meetings, attended by tens of thousands of students. [...] The new trend was billed not only as a way to reclaim religious legitimacy, but as an alternative to leftists student activism that had permeated university campuses under Nasser. Islam was a vote for a more virtuous lifestyle, where good would overcome evil. It was an endorsement of a different value system, a rejection of what was perceived as the decadent and ultimately futile socialism and pan-Arabism of the Nasser era.

(Abdo 2002: 111)

Moreover, in 1971 Sadat amended the Article 2 of the Constitution. According to this amendment the Sharia became “the principle source of legislation”, whereas the previous formulation defined it as “a principal source of legislation” (Ayubi in Tripp and Owen 1989: 94). Although religiously based movements are not granted the status of political parties, this article still allows the MB to participate as defenders of Sharia and promote its application by a Shura council (see Brown and Hamzawy 2008: 2-3).

As a result, the Islamic idiom gained the sympathies not only of a president who liked to be called “believer”, but also of increasingly larger segments of the population. In the aftermath of the failure of Nasser's Arab socialism, marked by the 1967 defeat, the attitude of both the ruling class and the society at large began leaning towards what then appeared to be a viable and sound solution. Such an 'ideological need' would allow the rise of Islamic discourse to re-enter the political scenario as a crucial player and, in the long term, give the Muslim Brotherhood the chance to resume its political trajectory. As Ayubi noted:

It was only natural that as soon as wider sections of the bourgeoisie began thinking about political alternatives, many of them would lean towards this espouser of a political doctrine that more consistently reflected the growing influence of this ideology within their ranks. Also of vital significance is the fact that the little challenged popularity of this ideology amongst the popular classes can be drawn upon by the Brotherhood and translated into political support. At one and the same time, the moderation and pragmatism of the Muslim Brotherhood reassures the bourgeoisie that any political changes undertaken with the help of its agency will cause as little pain as possible, while its political discourse remains capable of expressing to some extent the class and national grievances of the popular classes.

(in Tripp and Owen 1989: 97)

The re-appearance of Islamist discourse into the political scene was also a consequence of Sadat's policy of containment. During the first years of his rule, Sadat freed several political

prisoners - including Islamists and MB members – and used them to contain the spread of leftist ideologies especially in university campuses. Drawing a comparison, Maye Kassem notes that, while Nasser perceived the Ikhwan as his major opponents, Sadat used them to consolidate his power. Although this strategy did not result in a legal recognition of the organization, it did however allow the Muslim Brotherhood “to participate on several levels in the socioeconomic and political arena (Kassem 2004: 140-142). In so doing, not only did Sadat nurtur the growth of Islamist currents, one of which would eventually kill him, but he also encouraged the rise of a new breed of MB members who in the future would launch “the first sustained engagement with state institutions and competing political groups” (El-Ghobashy 2005: 377).

Yet ideological affinities and convergent political interests are not the only factors paving the way for the Brotherhood's success. It is important not to forget that Sadat's neoliberal programme (*Infitah*) produced, directly and indirectly, the material conditions under which the Brothers could thrive. This aspect is quite often absent from dominant accounts of political Islam. A convenient move, for only in this way can the Ikhwan be depicted as a mere reaction against the failure of secular nationalism or the disruptive force of globalization¹⁰⁰. Accounts focusing on the Ikhwan ideological claims tend to neglect the fact that Islamism, as Beinini rightly put it, “appeals to both the losers and the winners of global neo-liberal economic restructuring” (2005: 113). It seems to me that while losers are omnipresent in these accounts, though always as passive subjects, the winners among the Brothers are more often than not absent from the picture. Such an erasure is not only ideological in itself, but also prevents us from a perspective able to gauge both weaknesses and strengths of the Muslim Brotherhood.

True, the political language deployed by the Ikhwan grants them an obvious appeal. Yet, by merely focusing on this aspect, one not only risks to reproduce cultural essentialist visions but also fails to explain what renders their particular articulation of Islam so successful. Likewise, while the failures of previous regimes as well as the Brothers' organizational capacities should be taken into account, it is often unclear why they succeeded where others have failed. The key question, then, is under what conditions was the Ikhwan political success possible? And the only way to address this question by looking at their historical trajectory. If one does so it then becomes necessary to follow the arguments of authors such as Sami Zubaida and conclude that the Muslim Brotherhood is in fact

¹⁰⁰Seen from a purely cultural perspective, political Islam is often portrayed as a merely reactionary force that aims to either take the place of failed secular nationalist regimes or to counter-act against processes of globalization, which they see as undermining the integrity and authenticity of Islamic culture. Ayubi's (1980) and Ibrahim's accounts (1982) provide good examples of the first camp, whereas authors such as Kepel (2002; 2005) Roy (1996; 2004; 2010) and Barber (1996) could be ascribed to the second one. For a critique of Roy's thesis about political Islam see Bayat (2005) and Ismail (2001; 2006: Ch. 6). For a rebuttal of Barber's argument, who reproduces the Orientalist canon in opposing Islam (as Jihad) versus globalization (as McWorld), see Mitchell (2002).

at ease with modernity (Zubaida 1993: 50). For the Ikhwan have benefitted from and enthusiastically embraced the Sadat's *infitah*. Not only did the Brotherhood indirectly benefit from the neoliberal re-structuring of Egypt, as this allowed them to occupy with the provision of services areas where the state was patently absent; they also directly benefited from the waves of liberalization and privatization implemented under such a predicament.

The importance of this historical conjuncture cannot be overlooked, for it is precisely during these years that the Muslim Brotherhood would consolidate their new ideological and political positioning. Besides the convenient tactical alliance, there was an ideological affiliation binding Sadat's regime and the new course of the Muslim Brotherhood, which would be institutionalized, according to Sameh Naguib, through the publication of their magazine *Al Dawaa*:

When the Brotherhood leaders who had been jailed under Nasser were released in the 1970s they began a regroupment around the monthly magazine *Al Dawaa* [...]. The politics of *Al Dawaa* and the strategy and tactics of the new Brotherhood were associated with the social composition of the new grouping. [...] *Al Dawaa* was clearly in support of Sadat's liberalisation policies; its only reservations related to the moral implications and the problems of a perceived Western 'cultural invasion'.

(in El Mahdi and Marfleet 2009: 109)

This new reconfiguration allowed the impressive rise of the Brothers who, after two decades of imprisonment and torture, were able to fully resume their social, economic and political activities. Sadat's neoliberal policies reinforced, both economically and politically, the Brothers' leadership, some of whom were able to create financial empires. The magnitude of this dynamic is aptly rendered by the words of an Egyptian writer who did not hesitate to define Sadat's open door policy a “bearded *infitah*” (*infitah multahi*) (in Zubaida 1993: xx). It is estimated that by the 1980s around 40 per cent of all the newly-established private ventures were related to the Brotherhood, with 8 out of the 18 families dominating Egypt's economy being connected to them (Beinin 2005: 120; see also El Mahdi and Marfleet 2009: 109; Zubaida 1990; 1992).

In my view, then, the new course of the Muslim Brotherhood, and their stunning political achievements under Mubarak, are to be understood in light of what occurred under Sadat' rule. In the 1970s, the group was able to fully operationalize its ideology, sustained through a deeply-rooted social network established and maintained since Hasan al Banna. The demise of Nasser's nationalism provided fertile ground to the Brothers' ethical solution, with their appeal steadily growing after the alignment with Sadat's agenda. Ironically enough, the Islamic solution they proposed only became successful once articulated as a “cultural framework for capital accumulation” (Beinin 2005: 113). Anglo-American neoliberal capitalism, that is to say. Such an

encounter was, for the Muslim Brotherhood, just as contradictory as it was productive. And it is exactly within this framework that it is possible to explain the emergence of a new generation of Ikhwan who gradually entered the political realm through civil society institutions, from students unions to professional associations. Their performance would eventually translate into a political power capable to contrast Mubarak's strength in parliamentary politics.

Mubarak and the Brothers: A post-Islamist Turn?

The years under Mubarak have been featured by several phases, each of which has influenced the contemporary configuration of the MB, its positioning within the national political landscape and, as a consequence, its attitude toward the regime. From the activism inside professional associations and syndicates to the first electoral gains in parliamentary politics the regime kept oscillating between repression and surveillance. Early 1980s were a relatively peaceful period, as Mubarak perceived that the Islamist threat, due to the mass arrests following Sadat's assassination, was over. These years are characterized by a nonviolent strategy of containment. Tolerated but still outlawed, the Islamists could not benefit from Sadat's conciliatory environment, as Mubarak tightly controlled the legislative framework regulating political participation:

[A]ttempts to control wholesale opposition gains in legislative and syndicate elections were not overtly brutal. Instead, they focused on semicovert methods of containment such as the application of constraining participatory laws and disparate co-optation tactics. [This] can be attributed to the fact that Mubarak was in the process of consolidating his power base within the military, National Democratic Party (NDP), legislative, and executive realms.

(Kassem 2004: 47)

However, the problem was behind the corner. The performance of MB members within professional associations and syndicates represents not only a crucial turning point in the evolution of the organization, which was slowly but inexorably translating social activism into political power, but it consequently marked the beginning of yet another era of harsh confrontation between the state and the Brotherhood. Sadat's tolerance allowed the rise of a generation of MB activists that gradually reached leading positions within student unions and university campuses. This experience would equip them with organizational and political abilities that would later be applied to professional associations and syndicates. The first achievement is represented by the 1984 elections of MB members in the medical association. The consensus grew as the group distinguished itself for pragmatism and accountability (El-Ghobashy 2005: 380). The history of MB participation in Egyptian political life is clearly described by Abdo in *No God but God*:

In contrast to an indifferent state, the Islamists were able to give hope to the lost generation of professionals by taking into account both their temporal and spiritual needs. [...] By contesting and winning seats on the union boards in free and fair elections, the Islamists showed the middle class that democracy was possible even under the existing authoritarian regime. [...] Once in office, they generally proved honest and competent managers, building up huge surpluses in the syndicate coffers and respecting democratic norm and traditions. By the mid-1990s, the state found itself increasingly unable to compete for influence among the same professionals it had once groomed to lead the country's economic and political development.

(Abdo 2002: 72)

The experience accumulated through activism - first in university campuses and later within trade unions, professional associations and syndicates - was then reproduced in parliamentary elections. In these occasions, the MB performed a striking series of electoral victories from '84 till 2005. Despite being banned from formal political life, MB members resorted to the use of a mixed strategy, ranging from pragmatic alliances with other parties and running as independent candidates. The '84 and '87 elections, saw them winning respectively 8 and 30 seats, thanks to electoral alliance with the New Wafd Party first, and the Labour Party later (Fahmy 2002: 84). The 1987 electoral result represented a turning point in the state-MB relations. Shortly before the election “approximately 2,000 Brotherhood members and supporters” were arrested, thus showing the “growing anxiety” of the government (Kassem 2004: 152). Since then, the palpable tension between the opponents has always characterized MB positioning and strategies. The impressive performance of the MB in the political field reached its apex in the 2005 elections, when a parliamentary bloc formed by MB independent candidates won 88 seats becoming the largest opposition group in parliament. The experience of MB parliamentary bloc has been positively reviewed by Shehata and Stacher:

[A]s the crackdown on its Brothers outside the legislature proceeds, the Brotherhood parliamentary bloc is being noticed in Egypt for its work across ideological lines to serve constituents and increase its collective knowledge of local, national and international affairs. Moreover, the delegation has not pursued an agenda focused on banning books and legislating the length of skirts. It has pursued an agenda of political reform. In addition, the bloc's political practice—its proactive study of political issues and use of parliamentary procedure to hold the government's feet to the fire—has the potential to strengthen permanently the institution of Parliament vis-à-vis the executive led by President Husni Mubarak.

(Shehata and Stacher 2006: 33)

It is important to pause for a moment on an aspect with both symbolic and practical repercussions on the ways in which one understands the relationship between the MB and Mubarak. Although much is yet to be written about it, such a relationship is conventionally framed as a confrontation between two opposing forces, the former gaining political legitimacy from repressing

the latter. For Hisham ‘Awadi, the relationship between Mubarak and the Brothers is to be understood precisely as “a mutual struggle for recognition” (2005: 17). Asef Bayat frames the struggle in Gramscian terms. Having compared the trajectories of Islamist movements in Iran and Egypt he notes different strategies and outcomes. In Iran, the Islamist movement seized state power and islamized society from above. Driven by the urgency of post-war reconstruction, the government took a more secular approach, while social movements became more visible and proactive (Bayat 1996). In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood opted for a gradualist approach, working within civil society so as to Islamize it from below. The outcome, in this case, is rather difficult to assess. The Muslim Brotherhood did not engage the Egyptian state directly, through a frontal attack, but rather through a sustained “war of position” within civil society (Bayat 1998). Yet the state eventually managed to recuperate the forces set in motion by political Islam and defuse its mobilizational capacity:

The relative success of the movement in changing Egyptian society and in challenging the state was in part the cause of its own downturn. [...] [C]onservative Islamism merged with strong nativist sentiment while the state moved in to appropriate religious and moral authority. [...] [S]ocioreligious change initiated from below by the Islamist movement and subsequently appropriated by the target of that change, the state, which from then on attempted to contain and control its trajectory.

(Bayat 2007: 138)

Rather than following Roy and declare the failure of political Islam (1996), Bayat argues instead that these experiences signal a profound reconfiguration of the Islamist camp. What they have in common is a tendency for Islam to lose its centrality as a source of political legitimacy and mobilization in favor of a more pragmatic approach to power and mundanity. Islamism, in other words, is living through a post-Islamist turn:

[P]ost-Islamism is not anti-Islamic, but rather reflects a tendency to res secularize religion [...] the idea of fusion between Islam (as a personalized faith) and individual freedom and choice [...] [it] is manifested in acknowledging secular exigencies, in a freedom from rigidity, in breaking down the monopoly of religious truth, in the sacred giving way to the profane.

(Bayat 1996: 45-46)

However inspiring this term might be for Muslims, I find it rather problematic. One could argue that post-Islamism does nothing but continue to approach the Middle East through the analytical lens of (political) Islam which, while being declared as overcome, remains the only perspective informing the production of knowledge about the region. It is also puzzling to see a scholar otherwise attentive to West-centric assumptions reproduce the political grammar of liberal

democracy. Religion retreats in the private/individual sphere, hermeneutic pluralism replaces the monopoly of religious truth, the sacred opposes the profane and the dialectic relation between the state and civil society frames national politics (see Bayat 1996: 45-46; 2007: 10-15). As a political project, post-Islamism “strives to marry Islam with individual choice and freedom, with democracy and modernity” (2010: 243). For some reason, liberalism is immune from Eurocentrism and is envisioned as an inexorable outcome of modernity and democracy.

Yet history always has something else up its sleeve. Contrary to both Roy and Bayat, and ironically in line with the cynical side of the 'international community', Egypt has now an Islamist in power. A member of the Guidance Office of the Muslim Brotherhood, then president of the newly-formed Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), Mohammed Morsy was preferred to Khairat el-Shater in the run-up of the May-June 2012 presidential elections and managed to defeat Ahmed Shafiq. Neither post-Islamism nor defusion, political Islam appears to be where it wanted to be from the beginning. Having assumed a leading role in civil society, the group became the only credible parliamentary opposition and is now living the dream.

If anything, the pragmatic approach to parliamentary politics indicate that the Ikhwan have always been better interpreters of *realpolitik* than Islamism. With post-Islamism, Bayat defines the encounter of political Islam with modernity. But such an encounter does not occur in a historical void, nor without powerful interlocutors. It is necessary to historicize this encounter, identifying the parties involved and the conditions under which it took place. In other words, the political trajectory of the Muslim Brotherhood should be read not only against the national context but also the broader historical and geopolitical setting. This means that the contentious processes Bayat regards as a “backdrop” -e.g. “economic liberalization” and “cultural globalization” (Bayat 2007: 138)- should be brought back into the picture and its operational logic of power exposed. From this angle it is possible to see that the relationship between Islamism and modernity is structured by the logic of exception. Neither a contest for political legitimacy nor a Gramscian war of position, the relationship between the Ikhwan and the Egyptian state is founded upon a permanent state of exception, with the former incarnating the exclusion.

Mahzoura: Islamism and/as the Arab State of Exception

A juridical term, an effective technique of government and a powerful rhetorical device, the concept of the state of emergency finds in the German jurist and political philosopher Carl Schmitt a coherent theoretical elaboration. Despite his affiliation with the Nazi party, his lucid treatment of sovereignty and the nation-state is a merit which many leftist scholars do not hesitate to credit him for (see

Agamben 1998, 2005; Alliez and Negri 2003; Hardt and Negri; 2000; Mouffe 2005; 2006; Virno 2008). “Sovereign”, Schmitt noted in his *Political Theology*, “is he who decides on the state of exception” (2006 [1922]: 5). Yet the exception, Agamben adds, “is a kind of exclusion”, an “extreme form of relation by which something is included solely through its exclusion” (1998: 18-19). To him, the relation of exception is something that is best described with the concept of ban. The exception, which the sovereign is entitled to declare, renew or revoke, is founded upon an exclusion or, more to the point, upon the act of excluding or banning something or someone:

The relation of exception is a relation of ban. He who has been banned is not, in fact, simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it but rather *abandoned* by it, that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable. It is literally not possible to say whether the one who has been banned is outside or inside the juridical order.

(Agamben 1998: 23)

Provided that one takes notice of the different historical contexts, it is through this analytical lens that it is possible to grasp the relation between the Egyptian state and political Islam. The condition of being *mahzoura* – banned, excluded - is that which characterizes it the most. Not only is this the ultimate source of political legitimacy for the former, but it also point to the political condition which the latter navigated through. It is not surprising, then, to see the vocabulary of the exception being deployed by both Ikhwan and state authorities during periods of crisis. Shortly after the Egyptian revolution, in particular, the logic of exception became fully visible. To begin with, consider the following statement by Ahmad Shafiq:

“I represent a secular state... the Brotherhood represents a sectarian state. [...] I represent progress and light, they represent backwardness and darkness,” he said. Shafiq said he would strive for a "modern, civil, fair state" while the Muslim Brotherhood will “take it to the dark ages”.

(AFP 2012)

One cannot but notice how Shafiq's statements concisely articulate the entire Orientalist canon about the Middle East. The secular state, which Shafiq says he represent, is associated with positive notions of civility, modernity, equality and light. Islamist forces, on the other hand, are portrayed as divisive, disruptive, dark, backward and dangerous. To those accustomed to the rhetoric of Arab authoritarian regimes this will sound even trite. Shafiq's rhetorics is no different from Mubarak's, who routinely characterized the Ikhwan as an obscurantist, threatening mafia-like force bent on diverting the country from its progressive and secular path (see Shehata and Stacher 2006: 36).

Consider now the following statements made respectively by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) and Mohammad Morsi. The first one was released after a harsh

confrontation between the SCAF and Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), the party launched by the Muslim Brotherhood. The latter called for the dissolution of the government led by Kamal el-Ganzouri. In reply to the FJP statement, the SCAF urged the Brothers “to be aware of the lessons of history, to avoid past mistakes that we don't want to return to, and to look instead towards the future” (Mourad 2012). The history lesson the SCAF was referring to is widely believed to be that which marks the end of the short honeymoon between Gamal abd el-Nasser and the Ikhwan, shortly after the Free Officers' coup in 1952. What is now dubbed as the “1954 scenario” will return in the words of a triumphant statement made by Mohammad Morsi. Soon after the demise of Mubarak, the then second-rank figure proclaimed that “the concept and the era of [being] *Mahzoura*” was over (Shams al-Din 2011).

Such historical references are significant because they capture the fundamental logic behind the harsh confrontation between the Egyptian regime and the Muslim Brotherhood. What these three statements have in common is that they all point to the word uttered by Morsy. The term *mahzour* indicates a spatial delimitation, an exclusion. It is the word used to refer to Nasser's ban of the Muslim Brotherhood from Egypt's political life. It also is the “1954 scenario” the SCAF urged the Ikhwan to learn from. The political modernity of the Egyptian state was actually founded upon such a relation of exception, that “history lesson”.

How many times have we listened to dire warnings about the threat posed by Islamism as a suspension of existing order, peacefulness and stability? How else to interpret Shafiq's statement, envisioning a dark future for their country, had they manage to seize state power? It is precisely in these terms that Islam has been construed as an irreducible and incompatible Other, a constant threat to 'Western civilization'. Its function was to replace the danger embodied by the Soviet Union during the cold war, something that should now be seen as having prosecuted under the guise of the War on Terror. Hamid Dabashi provides a succinct way to illustrate the Schmittian construction of such an 'Islamic enemy':

Fukuyama declares that Western liberal democracy has triumphed over all the alternatives; Huntington recasts this triumphalist idea in the language of conflict, proposing that Western civilization now faces great threats from its Islamic and Chinese nemeses. [...] Soviet Communism yielded to Islamism as the West's new nemesis. [...] For about four years, the West was in a state of limbo, not quite knowing what to do with itself after Fukuyama [...] declared it triumphant, until Huntington [...] manufactured a new global enemy for it. [...] The emergence of Islam as the nemesis of the West gave a new lease of life to old-fashioned Orientalism. Among those who have made careers out of glorifying Western civilization and lamenting its vulnerability to the threat of Islam, no one could outdo Bernard Lewis [...] who began his career in the intelligence corps of the British army and ended it as a consultant to the Pentagon-thus linking British colonialism and American imperialism in the span of a single life.

To fully appreciate the political trajectory of the Muslim Brotherhood, one needs to go beyond an exclusive focus on national politics, and insert it into the broader cultural and historical context. It is to be read against the background of that permanent state of exception which, especially after the 9/11, became the principal technique through which the Middle East was governed and geopolitical equilibrium maintained. It is important to clarify that this was not just a repressive mechanism, but one that also elicits active modes of subjectivation. One is then to return to Bayat's definition of post-Islamism as an effort to marry Islam with democracy and modernity, but with a specific understanding of these terms. For what he describes as an encounter between ideas or values is in fact to be located within a precise historical context. The encounter of Islamist movements was not with democracy and/or modernity as such, but with that crude mixture of neoclassical economics and social conservatism which hegemonized the political landscape since the fall of the Berlin Wall and goes by the name of neoliberalism (see Harvey 2005). This is the vision of democracy with which the Ikhwan engaged since their re-emergence in the 1970s. One could elaborate further on Zubaida's thesis about the Muslim Brotherhood (1993: 50). Just like their emergence in the late 1920s resulted from the encounter with Anglo-European modernity/coloniality, their re-emergence in the 1970s should be seen as affected by the encounter with Anglo-American neoliberalism.

Now, If one retains the traditional explanatory framework, s/he would be inevitably led to regard the emergence of Islamist movements as a reaction to the disruptive process of globalization. However, as I illustrated in the preceding sections, during the 1970s the Ikhwan experienced a newly-found mobilizational capacity, since the state granted them a modicum of political freedom while at the same time retreating from the provision of social services to facilitate the emergence of a private sector. Under Sadat Egypt would fully embrace the neoliberal doctrine through the *Infitah*. The higher cadres of the organization actually benefited from the new economic and political climate instituted by Sadat's policies, being among the few who thrived in it and would later collect the electoral fruits. From a socio-historical perspective then, it is clear that the engagement of Ikhwan with globalization is far more complex than an anachronistic reaction to it.

In this respect, their political achievements in parliamentary politics are to be seen as perfectly fitting within the logic of globalization, rather than contradictory or paradoxical. Consistently with a pragmatic approach to politics, the leading figures of the movement sought to engage in dialogue, build connections, start discussions and negotiations. This attitude translated in a massive engagement with new media technologies in order to manage its own institutional presence and

other actors' perception of it. The message to the West was “no need to be afraid of us”, as Khayrat el-Shater concisely put it from the pages of *Guardian* (El-Shatir 2005). At home, as Mohammad Badie stated before the parliamentary elections in 2010, the line to be maintained was that of “participation [in parliamentary politics], not confrontation” (Badie 2010).

Such an engagement was not at all limited to domestic political forces. On the contrary, the group reached out a diverse range of private organizations and research institutions. As I hope to show particularly with the analysis of Ikhwanweb, since their political exploit in 2005 the Muslim Brotherhood is followed and engaged by a loose transnational network of think tanks, specialized publications, political foundations. One cannot but agree with Dabashi's thesis in *Post-Orientalism*, where he defines their mode of knowledge production as *espistemic endosmosis*:

namely a phase in the post-Orientalist period when such knowledge is no longer centered in any university or research institute and is in fact widely disseminated in varied forms of private and public forums, and as such resisting categorization and operating on a cacophonous modulation. *Endosmosis* here refers to the inward flow of dis/information through the permeable membrane of the mass media—a cellular labyrinth of dissemination or cavities of transmutation—toward the public domain at large and there mutated into a greater concentration: Externalization, objectivation, and internalization as Berger and Luckmann would say.

(Dabashi 2009: 222)

Yet, looking at the experience of the Ikhwan, rather than endosmotic these organizations serve as truly biopolitical institutions, overseeing, that is, the political conduct of the movement as a whole. Organizations such as *RAND Corporation*, the *Brookings Institution*, the *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* or the publication *Foreign Policy* have been quite active in approaching the group and producing knowledge about it. The framework from which the organization was 'assessed' followed the requirements of liberal democracy: free-market economy, development of the private sector, privatization were the only boxes to be ticked in economics. A bureaucratic understanding of parliamentary politics, with a minor concern for minorities' representation quotas, as well as a clear separation of secular and religious powers were the features these organizations pushed the Ikhwan towards.

Conclusion: Cracks from Below

At the same time, however, several members were pursuing different paths. Young members, in particular, started questioning the representational mechanisms of the group and its hegemonic ambition to represent the *Islamicness* of the country. They felt unrepresented through traditional

channels while at the same time being forbidden to participate in other ways. It is not unsurprising then that participation to street protests and the rising tide of the Kefaya movement became a problem. The leadership refrained from taking officially part to initiatives of protests for fear of repressive waves and expected the members to follow the same line. But several members were already participating to the initiatives of Kefaya on an individual basis. Not only ordinary members, but leading figures of the caliber of Abdel Moneim Aboul-Futuh were involved with civil protests since the beginning.

Against a double pressure imposed from the regime and the organization, the grassroots level started a centrifugal movement, joining other forces in civil society, exploring other ways of doing politics. In so doing, not only did they create multiple ruptures within the ideological edifice of unity erected by the group's leadership, but they also crossed the secular/religious divide upon the regional identity-politics is grounded. By refuting a rigid binary division between religious and secular identity as well as between parliamentary and street politics, a minoritarian political subjectivity could emergent and challenge the arrangements thus far contributing to the preservation of the status quo.

In this situation, media and digital technologies came to play a peculiar role. The internet in particular became the preferred media environment since other traditional communication channels were not accessible. TV channels and radio stations were censored or dominated by state authorities. Hence, just like any other emergent political force in Egypt, the minor position within the Ikhwan took the cyberspace as its main communicational infrastructure. The younger generation of the Muslim Brotherhood started their own blogs. They initially resorted to blogging in order to counteract the influence of leftist ideologies within the Egyptian blogosphere. Yet they ended up doing something rather different which Khalil Al-Anani, who has been following this trend since its appearance, has defined as follows:

[T]hey are a phenomenon aiming to break taboos that have been in place for more than 80 years, and they are buttressed by the organizational values and discipline of the Muslim Brotherhood.

(Al-Anani 2009: 30)

Al-Anani further classifies the development of an Ikhwan-related blogging scene into three distinct phases: exploration, civil resistance, and self-criticism (Al-Anani 2009). From early attempts and experiments, the MB online community has now grown into an extremely diverse network of blogs, multimedia platforms and social network profiles, wikis and forums. While being used to remember even the most mundane event, the political content often displayed ranges from

human rights campaigns to issues and events from Palestine and the provision of updates concerning the detentions and trials of MB members. Following for a moment Al-Anani's subdivision, I would argue that the most significant political aspect of the MB blogging scene is the "self-criticism phase". However, rather than conceiving of it as a discrete temporal unit, this phase was in fact a conflictual dynamic that unfolded through silences and explosions. An example of the latter occurred during the summer 2007, when the Muslim Brotherhood released its draft party platform. This occasion highlighted in an unprecedented fashion the internal heterogeneity of the organization, since both the content and the modes through which such draft was produced were openly criticized by young members through their blogs. Such an event undermined one of the first prominent features of the Muslim Brotherhood, its ability to speak one voice:

Since the movement was founded in 1928, it has preserved a remarkable ability to speak to the public in a single voice and contain the different tendencies without division. [...] But despite such disincentives, the movement has not succeeded in containing debate to quiet internal dialogue. The Brotherhood is currently speaking with several different voices, providing an unusual opportunity for observers and analysts to understand the different positions and orientations within the movement and even some of its mechanisms for making authoritative decisions.

(Brown and Hamzawy 2008: 6-7)

With the debate going online, MB bloggers went against the grain of Ikhwan conventional code of conduct, exposing long established taboos and contesting strategies and decision-making processes. Public discussions led them to challenge other foundational ideas of the organization, the listen and obey and *din wa dawla* formula (Lynch, 2007). They started talking about politics and secularism, calling for a clear division between politics and religion, between *siyasi* (political) and *da'awi* (religious outreach) approaches, and the foundation of a political party independent from the main organization. How can one define, then, the role played by digital technologies within the internal dynamic of the Muslim Brotherhood? To address this question, in the following chapters I will draw on the theoretical argument elaborated in chapters one and two, and apply it to a selection of media outlets launched and maintained by members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Chapter 4

Ikhwanweb as a Digital Archive¹⁰¹

The last decade witnessed increasing scholarly interest in the study of digital activism and the role of new media in Arab countries. In Egypt, particularly after the wave of mass protests led by the Kefaya coalition in the early 2000s, the Egyptian blogosphere has attracted a great deal of attention. Among parties and groups using digital technologies, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) has distinguished itself by the sheer volume of its media initiatives - the Islamist movement now has a diversified range of online presences, more or less directly related to it. In 2003, the MB launched its official Arabic website in 2003 and the English version, *Ikhwanweb*, two years later. Like all MB's previous media outlets, or attempted media outlets, these two official websites are often subjected to the repressive power of the Egyptian regime. But how is it that a website can represent a political threat? What is it that makes a website so empowering (the perception of those who use it) and so subversive (the perception of those who try to obstruct the former)?

In chapter two, I argued that we must first shift our focus from the communication of meanings to the storage of information. Accordingly, media come to be understood as storage devices, as archives. Following Foucault and Derrida, who both designate the concept of archive as crucial for understanding social and political practices, the archive has been applied in a wide range of disciplines, including the study of new media. Along these lines, the concept will be applied to provide a brief historical account of the website, a description of its structure and an analysis of its content. As I hope to show, in this case a website acted as the technical pre-condition enabling a group such as the MB, to record information rather than to communicate it and to secure information by consigning it to a digital archive. The technological architecture of the website constitutes the material infrastructure upon which the MB is able to articulate its political discourse. Yet, the way in which this political discourse is constructed and articulated will also be influenced by the encounter with other actors and political subjects.

¹⁰¹An earlier version of this chapter was presented as a conference paper. See d'Urbano, Paolo (2010). "*Ikhwanweb* as a Digital Archive". *New Media/Alternative Politics*, Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH), University of Cambridge (Cambridge), 14-16 October.

Ikhwanweb: History in a Box

To some extent, the adoption of digital technologies was necessary for the Muslim Brotherhood, as access to mainstream media under the Mubarak regime proved to be highly problematic. The official rhetoric ran along the lines set by the President himself, who would routinely fan the flames of an “Islamist takeover”, question the Brotherhood's commitment to the “principles of democracy” and warns against an incoming “cancellation of democracy” (in Shehata and Stacher, 2006: 36). Its peculiar political status -a tolerated but formally illegal organization, or *mahzoura* (see chapter three)- did not help its representatives in getting their perspective out to the public in occasion of electoral competitions.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, under Mubarak the regime opted for a carrot-and-stick strategy to deal with the Muslim Brotherhood, also known among the Brothers as “the half open/half closed door policy”¹⁰². State authorities combined limited concessions with repressive cycles. After the opening of new venues for political participation, the group was periodically subjected to waves of raids and detentions. One of such cycle of repression started after the 2005 elections, when the Ikhwan managed to win 88 seats in parliament through a bloc of MB representatives running as independent candidates. Shehata and Stacher report that more than 800 Brothers were arrested, including leading figures such as Essam al-Erian and Muhammad Mursi (Shehata and Stacher 2007). A few months later, the so-called “al-Azhar incident” would provide the regime with an excellent pretext to launch yet another round of repression and arrests. Here is an account of the event:

Dressed in black, their faces covered with matching hoods whose headbands read *samidun*, or “steadfast,” on December 10, 2006 several dozen young Muslim Brothers marched from the student center to the university's main gate. Six of the masked youths, according to video and eyewitnesses, lined up in the middle of a square formed by the others and performed martial arts exercises reminiscent of demonstrations by Hamas and Hizballah. Around 2,000 students were present for the show, which lasted approximately 25 minutes.

(Shehata and Stacher 2007)

In covering the event, both state and corporate media would resort to terms such as “al-Azhar militias” or the Brother's Army, making clear connections between the event and the violent past of the organization (see Hamzawy 2007; Al Houdaiby 2007). A few days later, the regime would arrest hundreds of members, detaining both young students and senior leaders such as Khairat el-Shatir (see Shehata and Stacher 2007). Indeed, university campuses were not the only venues where the

¹⁰²Hamza, Khaled. 2009. “Muslim Brotherhood's Media, from the Missionary to the Political discourse”. *IkhwanWeb*. June 16. <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=20546>.

political participation of the Muslim Brotherhood was closely disciplined and monitored. The access to national channels of communication soon became an even more problematic issue.

National mainstream media, and in particular state-owned tv channels, seemed to be tightly controlled by the regime when it came to independent candidates of the MB parliamentary bloc trying to participate in talk shows and political programs. In 2008, resorting to the official line in dealing with the organization, the then Egyptian Minister of Information Anas el-Feqi prohibited the MB parliamentary members “to participate in live TV programs and interviews” on the grounds that they were speaking on behalf of an “outlawed group”¹⁰³. Although the Ikhwan are now able to project their hegemony via state television¹⁰⁴, under Mubarak their representatives were routinely prevented from appearing on national tv channels. It is important to remember that such measures were not at all reserved to the Ikhwan. In preparation of the 2010 People's Assembly elections, for example, other exponents of opposition groups, such as Al Ghad Party leader Ayman Nour and Mohammed el Baradei, were subjected to the same treatment¹⁰⁵.

That being said, however, the regime devoted a somewhat special degree of attention to the Ikhwan, while state-run media broadcast programs that did nothing but reproduce the official narrative, portraying the group as a mafia-like force bent on destroying the purportedly democratic life of the country. In 2010, during the month of Ramadan, the state tv aired a highly controversial tv series named “El Gamaa” (The Group)¹⁰⁶. Although the series was supposed to reconstruct the historical development of the Ikhwan, from Hasan al-Banna until the contemporary era, the way in which the organization was framed was dismissed by many commentators and activists. Tarek Shalabi, a widely known blogger not affiliated with the MB, criticized the tv series resembling it to “Nazi Germany propaganda” (quoted in Amr 2010).

The situation does not change when one takes into account the tight control imposed on mainstream newspapers. In the words of Khaled Hamza, Editor in Chief of *Ikhwanweb*, the publication of *Al Da'wa* – a newspaper published by the Muslim Brotherhood from 1975 to early 1980s – remains “the most prolific and active experience”, since after that brief period the regime began shutting down all the media outlets established by the MB all media initiatives between 1984

103Abdullah, Nadine. 2008. “Minister of Information: MB Parliamentarians still Belong to Outlawed Group”. *Ikhwanweb*. March 23. <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=16406>.

104On Sunday 2nd September 2012, Fatma Nabil became the first veiled anchorwoman to read the news on Egyptian state tv. Although the woman is not a member of the Ikhwan and defines as “a personal choice” that of wearing the veil, this clearly signals and performs a decisive change in the attitudes towards the veil in public spaces. See Al-Masry Al-Youm. 2012. “Egypt’s First Veiled State TV Presenter Appears on Screen.” *Egypt Independent*, September 2. <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/egypt-s-first-veiled-state-tv-presenter-appears-screen>.

105Ikhwanweb. 2010. “Egypt’s Authorities ban Political Opposition from Media”. *IkhwanWeb*. August 15. <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=26045>.

106Ikhwanweb. 2010. “MB opinion: Ruling regime should work on solving power crisis rather than defaming MB”. *Ikhwanweb*. August 21. <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=26114>.

and 2000¹⁰⁷. And this course of action has basically remain the same under the late period of the Mubarak regime, which especially in proximity of electoral events enacted systematic practices of repression against the media outlets established by opposition groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood. To reiterate, not only this treatment was not limited to the Ikhwan, since other political groups were subjected to it, but the repression also hit those publications that dared to host their writings or give space to ideas and authors perceived as close to the group. In 2006, for example, the weekly *Afāq Arabiyya*, published by Al-Ahrār Party (Liberal Party) but sympathetic to the positions of the MB, was shut down¹⁰⁸.

However, between the late 1990s and the early 2000s, the increased availability of digital technologies provided opposition groups with the only available avenue to establish their official media outlets. The Muslim Brotherhood was already experimenting with new media since the late 1990s. The first experiments with the digital technologies were the product of local sections or single individuals. However, in the first half of the 2000s the organization decided to establish online an official media outlet. In April 2003, the group launched an official website in Arabic, *Ikhwanonline*¹⁰⁹. Unfortunately, or rather predictably, just like previous media initiatives this website too attracted the attention of government authorities and the security apparatus. On 16 May 2004, the Egyptian authorities raided the location where the website was managed, arrested Gamal Nassar, the then Editor in Chief, and seized the servers¹¹⁰.

A few years later, history was to repeat itself. On 16 October 2005, the MB launched an English version of its official website *Ikhwanweb*¹¹¹. The project was supported by Khairat el-Shater -the second deputy chairman of the movement who would be imprisoned in 2007 by the Mubarak regime, released in 2011 after the revolution and briefly run as a presidential candidate before being replaced by now President Morsi. This new website was to be managed by Khaled Hamza, who is still the Editor in Chief of Ikhwanweb. On February 2008, the Egyptian authorities attacked the MB offices, seized technical equipments and detained the editor in chief¹¹². Following this harsh wave of repression and attacks the group decided to move the websites outside Egypt, buying the space needed to host them on servers located in the United States. Though it may seem a trivial problem,

107Hamza, Khaled. 2009. "Muslim Brotherhood's Media, from the Missionary to the Political discourse". *IkhwanWeb*. June 16. <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=20546>.

108Amer, Pakinam. 2006. Publication of Afaq Arabiya still on Hold. *Daily Star Egypt*. March 22. <http://www.dailystaregypt.com/article.aspx?ArticleID=967>. See also Amer, Pakinam. 2006. "A Chance to Speak Out." *Daily Star Egypt*. <http://www.dailystaregypt.com/article.aspx?ArticleID=1023>.

109<http://www.ikhwanonline.com/new/Default1.aspx>

110Hafez, Ahmad. 2008. "Muslim Brotherhood Websites". *IkhwanWeb*. December 13. <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=18865>.

111<http://www.ikhwanweb.com/>

112Hamza, Khaled. 2009. *Ibid*.

it seems that the constant attacks on technical equipment and the facilities where it was kept was one the main reasons leading the Ikhwan to move abroad the servers of their websites¹¹³. As also other reports seem to indicate, the seizing of technical equipment was a repressive technique frequently used by the regime¹¹⁴. The Egyptian authorities seem to concentrate their repressive efforts on servers, either by seizing or blocking them entirely. In doing so, the owner of a website needs to either retrieve and re-publish all the material contained in it or, in the worst case scenario, recreate it anew.

Before going any further, some technical explanations are required. Apart from the skills needed to design and run it, there are two necessary elements to launch and maintain a website: a domain name and a server. While the domain name is the actual online address of a website, the server is a powerful computer used to store not only all the material published on the website but also the softwares needed for its maintenance. When we access a website, the content we browse – be it video, sounds, images or text – is all stored in and retrieved from one or more servers.

This is significant for several reasons, as it not only indicates the point at which power appears, but also exposes the techniques and practices through which it constitutes the public space. Far from resembling any Habermasian conceptualization, the political field is in fact shaped by power relations, repressive techniques and resistance tactics. There is “no stable realm of public sphere”, as Demirović states, for the public/private axis upon which this notion is based is nothing but a “symbolic *dispositif*”, a “form of hegemony” that “organizes a specific representation of the societal sphere” (2004: 2). Rather than being modulated through rational arguments among equal peers, this *dispositif* is actualized by intervening in the infrastructure underpinning the material life of discourses, their technical *a priori*. Here, we are dealing with something more closely resembling Terranova’s “informational milieu”, where politics “is not so much a question of meanings that are encoded and decoded in texts, but a question of inclusion and exclusion, connection and disconnection, of informational warfare, and new forms of knowledge and power” (2004b: 52).

More importantly, though, what this account reveals quite clearly in my view is one of the crucial points where political power and knowledge appear to be inextricably connected; it exposes

113 I have repeatedly emailed the staff of Ikhwanweb asking them for an interview about this and other matters, but I did not receive any reply. As for what a server is, later on I will explain in a while what it is and why it is important. For now, it is enough here to say that this can be a simple computer, whose only function however is that of storing all the material published on a hosted website and needed for its running (softwares, files, databases etc). For a reference to the Ikhwan moving their servers abroad, see Amer, Pakinam. 2010. “Muslim Brotherhood Use New Media to Document History.” *Al-Masry Al-Youm*. <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/news/muslim-brotherhood-use-new-media-document-history>.

114 Mansour, Abdul Rahman. 2007. Egyptian Regime Blocks Opposition Websites, Weblogs. *Ikhwanweb*. October 12. <http://ikhwanweb.net/article.php?id=14360&ref=search.php>. See also Raoof, Ramy. 2009. “Egypt: No to Illegal Confiscation of Personal Devices”. *Egyptian Blog for Human Rights*, 12 July. <http://ebfhr.blogspot.com/2009/07/no-to-illegal-confiscation-of-personal.html>

the potentially subversive capacity of digital technologies. The server here constitutes what Gane defines, drawing on Kittler, the technical a priori, the technological pre-condition, that is, underpinning the material life of the MB political discourse (Gane 2005). As such, the server at once embodies and represents the potential appearance of a discourse. As a politically contentious group, the MB is empowered by the use of digital technology because it provides the movement with the ability to record – indeed, *consign* – events and statements, to build its own archive without which “there is no political power” (Derrida 1996: 4). It should not be a surprise, then, that government authorities target servers. For, as Benjamin Hutchens notes, the act of archiving is that which, by declaring what is “worthy of remembrance”, instantiates the “fiction of political authority” (Hutchens 2007: 39). In *Techniques of Forgetting*, Hutchens gives an account of a Zapatista militant in Chiapas who was seen clutching the computer that stored “Mayan's memories” while fleeing the approaching army. By protecting those consigned memories through archivization rather than oral transmission, the Zapatista militant was preserving them in their only mode of existence, or the only one that seemed to matter. “Only the archive “remembers””, as Hutchens claims, for “the fields of “been-forgotten” [...] or “not-even-remembered” [...] are equally marked by the archive as a cultural oblivion” (*ibidem*: 40).

MB vs. Al Qaeda: Dissociating from Political Violence

That a clear-cut dissociation from political violence in general, and al Qaeda in particular, was a pressing issue to tackle from the start is evident once the dedicated section is considered as a whole. Ikhwanweb was launched in 2005, and it is highly significant that one of the very first items published early that year is a 1996 press release issued by the Muslim Brotherhood to condemn a terrorist attack that killed 18 people and wounded 4:

The Muslim Brotherhood strongly condemns the criminal and savage attack on innocent tourists earlier in the morning today in the Europe Hotel on the Haram Pyramids Road, resulting in most savage massacre. [...] Such an act of profound perfidity and criminality [sic] is condemned by all religions, international norms, and humanitarian principles, and cannot be justified in any manner or form, nor its atrocity can be reduced for any motive whatsoever. The Muslim Brotherhood confirm their refusal and strongly condemn all such criminal acts and offer their sincerest condolences to the families of the victims and hope for a speedy recovery of the wounded.¹¹⁵

In chronological order, this is the first article published under the tag “MB vs. al Qaeda”¹¹⁶.

115Ikhwanweb. 2005. “Muslim Brotherhood Condemns Attack on Tourists in Cairo”. *Ikhwanweb*, 28 February. <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=13532>

116All items collected under the tag “MB vs Al Qaeda” are available at: <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/articles.php?pid=86>

This section is by now composed of more than 80 items whose primary focus is the relationship between the MB and al Qaeda. The collection is made of both original content and external resources. Among the first items, for example, there is a blogpost from Counterterrorism Blog examining the internet as a site of ideological confrontation between Hamas and al Qaeda, when the former won the 2006 elections in Gaza and Ayman al-Zawahiri accused them of “treachery and apostasy”¹¹⁷. Al-Zawahiri's criticism would also be directed at the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. On January 2006, the leading figure of al Qaeda issued a video message in which he violently attacked Islamist movements in the region. With their participation in the 2005 elections, the Muslim Brotherhood in particular were accused of believing in Western-style democracy. According to Zawahiri:

America tells Islamists: every time your behaviour improves, we'll give you more (seats), until you become secularists with only a false affiliation to Islam. [...] My Muslim nation, you will never enjoy free elections ... and governments answerable to their people ... unless you are liberated from the Crusader-Zionist occupation and corrupt governments, and that can only be achieved through jihad (holy war).¹¹⁸

A few days later, the Deputy Chief of Muslim Brotherhood, Dr. Mohammed Habib would issue a rebuttal of Zawahiri's attack, defining his statements as “utterly unrealistic”: “The Muslim Brotherhood has long stated its acceptance of democracy and political pluralism as well as peaceful transfer of power through ballot boxes”, he would declare during an interview published by *Ikhwanonline*, the MB official website in arabic, and then reported on *Ikhwanweb*¹¹⁹. The troubled relationship with Al Qaeda leading figure would come up once again, when *Der Spiegel* would publish an article claiming that Al-Zawahiri was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood¹²⁰. Few days later, Ikhwanweb would publish a press release to deny Zawahiri's affiliation with the movement and report a statement made by a member of the MB Executive Bureau: “the Muslim Brotherhood's ideology shuns violence and the movement has never practiced it [...] on the contrary we have been always adopting peaceful means for change”, claimed Mohammed Morsi¹²¹. On January 2007,

117Kohlmann, Evan. 2007. “NEFA Conference Slides: "The Internet as a Forum for Conflict Between the Brotherhood and Competing Salafi-Jihadists". *Counterterrorism Blog*, 3 July. Original post available at: http://counterterrorismblog.org/2007/07/nefa_conference_slides_the_int.php; also available on Ikhwanweb at: <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=1195>

118Sedarat, Firouz. 2006. “Zawahiri criticised Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, for believing in Western-style democracy”. *Reuters*, 7 January. Available on Ikhwanweb at: <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=4998>

119Ikhwanweb. 2006. “Muslim Brotherhood Rejects Al Zawahiri Statements and Stresses on Peaceful Reform”. *Ikhwanweb*, 11 January. <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=4993>

120Der Spiegel. 2006. “Dancing with the Devil: Charting the Rise of the Muslim Brotherhood”. *Der Spiegel*, 3 July. <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/dancing-with-the-devil-charting-the-rise-of-the-muslim-brotherhood-a-491925.html>

121Ikhwanweb. 2006. “Ayman Al-Zawahiri No MB Member: Leader”. *Ikhwanweb*, 6 July. <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=915>

following a wave of mass arrests against the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Zawahiri greeted his brothers detained by Mubarak, whom was called a “traitor”. Dismissing this comment, Mohammed Habib released a statement to once again stress the distance between the MB and al Qaeda:

The world now have come to realize the crystal clear difference between the Muslim Brotherhood’s ideology and that of Al-Qaeda network to which Dr. Al Zawahri belongs; we- the Muslim Brotherhood- reject completely the methods and actions by Al-Qaeda network and completely denounce violence and terrorism, and staunchly support peaceful change and reform.¹²²

On August 2008, the Financial Times published a profile of Khaled Sheykh Mohammed in which the latter claimed that he joined the Muslim Brotherhood as an adolescent and that he was “radicalized at youth camps”¹²³. One day later, Ikhwanweb published an editorial to deny these claims and demand a correction to the newspaper:

We, as the editorial board of the Muslim Brotherhood’s official website, felt deeply disappointed at such a fatal mistake by an internationally respected newspaper. [...] We reaffirm that Khaled Sheikh Mohamed was never affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood at any stage of his life, and that the Muslim Brotherhood has always had a moderating, not a radicalizing influence. The Muslim Brotherhood is a socio-political non-violent organization devoted to peaceful gradual reform, and is the complete opposite of Al Qaeda in its interpretation of Islam and its attitude to violence.¹²⁴

One of the most recent confrontations between al-Zawahiri and the Muslim Brotherhood occurred in late 2008, following the election of Barak H. Obama in United States. On that occasion, the Egyptian radical leader issued a video statement where he defined Obama a “house negro”, a clear reference to Malcolm X, arguing that he was the “direct opposite of honorable black Americans”. As a response, Ikhwanweb published a long editorial to both condemn the overtly racist tones of Zawahiri's speech and to reiterate once again the different Islamic ethos separating the latter's organization from the Muslim Brotherhood:

Apart from the epithet, Zawahri is absolutely mistaken if he thinks he is speaking in the name of Islam or Muslims. Islam has always reprimanded discrimination on the basis of color, just like it repudiated violence and the killing of innocent people. In fact the victory

122Ikhwanweb. 2007. “Habib: Muslim Brotherhood Rejects Al-Qaeda’s Ideology”. *Ikhwanweb*, 1 January. <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=2758>

123Sevastopulo, Demetri. 2008. “The face of 9/11”. *Financial Times*, 15 August. [http://www.ft.com/cms/s/ee1c1194-68d0-11dd-a4e5-0000779fd18c.Authorised=false.html? i_location=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ft.com%2Fcms%2Fs%2F0%2Fee1c1194-68d0-11dd-a4e5-0000779fd18c%2Cs01%3D1.html& i_referer=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ikhwanweb.com%2Farticle.php%3Fid%3D17601#axzz2U8Om0LqI](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/ee1c1194-68d0-11dd-a4e5-0000779fd18c.Authorised=false.html?i_location=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ft.com%2Fcms%2Fs%2F0%2Fee1c1194-68d0-11dd-a4e5-0000779fd18c%2Cs01%3D1.html&i_referer=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ikhwanweb.com%2Farticle.php%3Fid%3D17601#axzz2U8Om0LqI)

124Ali, Mariam. 2008. “The Muslim Brotherhood and KSM, Financial Times Fatal Error”. *Ikhwanweb*, 16 August. <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=17601>

of Obama is a victory of a civilization value endorsed by Islam and all divine religions. What should be vocally denounced is racial discrimination and terrorism in the name of religion. [...] The differences in race, color, or religion, as Islam ordains, should be a starting point from which all human beings can build bridges of mutual understanding and respect, not vice versa.¹²⁵

This is but a short selection of examples in which the need to distantiate the movement from al Qaeda clearly emerges. As mentioned earlier on, the section contains more articles along this line, but these may be taken from other media outlets. What renders significant the items included in this selection is that they all are original press releases engaging with and directly reacting to newspapers articles and research papers focusing precisely on such a relationship.

It is in this respect, then, that the concept of archive -as “first the law of what can be said”, following Foucault (1972: 145-146)- becomes very helpful as both a methodological tool and a theoretical concept. As a methodological tool, the archive is that which one navigates through while browsing a website. Indeed, the tag in question -“MB vs. al Qaeda”- serves to organize a large collection of news items which must be interrogated as an archive: it can be quantified; one can also make further subdivisions or specify selection criteria; it is also possible to reconstruct a chronological order, register continuities and variations. More importantly, however, is the fact that, as a theoretical concept, the archive exposes the fundamentally political function performed in this case by Ikhwanweb.

What this thematic section allows its users to do is to access and browse, in one click, dozens of articles and pages displaying the group's commitment to democratic value and parliamentary politics, while at the same time providing evidences in support of a clear differentiation between political violence and al Qaeda, on the one hand, and the strategies and tactics of the Muslim Brotherhood on the other. To be more specific, what this section does is not representing this dissociation from political violence; the latter is *produced, materialized* by this collection of supporting statements. To put it simply, this content, and the way in which it was assembled, did not exist before Ikhwanweb constructed it. By virtue of this constant labour of selecting and assembling news items according to a specified thread, Khaled Hamza can confidently declare the existence of an “unmistakable”, clear “epistemological and political separation” between movements such as al Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood¹²⁶. It is no coincidence that, in order to support this statement with substantial evidence, the editor in chief of Ikhwanweb includes a hyperlink connected to the “MB vs. al Qaeda” section.

125Hamza, Khaled and Ali, Mariam. 2008. “Editorial: Not In Defense of Obama”. *Ikhwanweb*, 22 November. <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=18720>

126Hamza, Khaled. 2009. *Ibidem*.

In chapter two, I mentioned Friedrich Kittler's take on media, noting how he defines them as institutions forming “discourse networks” (Kittler 1990). Here, however, it might be more productive to opt for a term which, in my view, is capable of containing in itself both words: *topology*. The way one conceives of the term topology should be expanded beyond that mere collection of nodes and networks one has in information science. In making this argument, I draw on the suggestion by Johannes Fabian who notes the constitutive ambivalence of term that contains in itself both the material and the symbolic. Indeed, the Greek term *topos* refers to both physical and symbolic spaces. Furthermore, and quite rightly so, Fabian differentiates topology from topography. Rather than *representing* a network, as the latter does, a topology discursively *performs* it (Fabian 2007: 47-51). One could then envision the internet as a constellation, or multiple constellations, composed of archival topologies, which both the ordinary user and the researcher must navigate through and interrogate.

The empowering dimension of new media, for a group like the MB, resides precisely in the fact that, through them, they were able to actually construct and produce an archival topology. It is not simply about endlessly and randomly amassing information; instead, what is necessary is a way to filter ideology through archival practices. And with regard to the relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and al Qaeda, the importance of being capable of redressing the perception of it cannot be overstated in my view. Please note that here I am not talking about communication, representation or expression. What empowered the MB was the capacity to actually produce and sediment this information, storing and processing it in a place they controlled. By resorting to the former terms one is often misled, since the material published by Ikhwanweb, and most importantly the way in which it is categorized, does not disappear the moment it is communicated. On the contrary, it keeps circulating, being accessed and re-used. Consider the system of tagging for a moment, a system of categorization to organize items uploaded on a website. By producing an archive where the words MB and West are positively associated, on the one hand, while negatively associating MB and al Qaeda, on the other, they actually contributed to create on the cyberspace the existence and reproduction of such a discourse.

MB and the West: Associating with “the West”

The dissociation from political violence and al Qaeda was only one of the most pressing issues behind the launch of Ikhwanweb. As mentioned earlier on, the website was primarily established to reach out “the West”. Indeed, a personal conversation with a young MB blogger confirms that this was the principal motive behind the creation of this website, and that its editor in chief, Khaled

Hamza, was so concerned about this that he would spend “months before launching the website to meet and analyse the western ideas on MB”¹²⁷. Further confirmation is provided by an interview which Khaled Hamza gave to al-Jazeera reporter Evan Hill:

The Brotherhood is keenly aware of how it is perceived by foreign media, and members of the organisation often say they loath being compared with al-Qaida or lumped into the extremist category. [...] On the other hand, the Brotherhood wants to know how it is viewed by Foreign Policy magazine, the Brookings Institution, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and mainstream news outlets such as the Washington Post, said Hamza, the editor of the group's site. Dialogue with the West is important, he said, since “there will come a point when the Brotherhood is in power, and we need to be ready for that...”

(Hill 2010)

It is under this light, then, that the way in which the Muslim Brotherhood engaged with “the West” through its official website in English acquires a crucial relevance. Once again, it is worth stressing the fact that, in this interview, one has a rather clear indication of what kind of “West” represent the intended audience which the Ikhwan aimed to reach through the launch of their Enlighs website. The quote reported above provides a rather comprehensive list of major research institutions, think tanks, specialized publications and high-profile newspapers and magazines. It is not surprising, then, to see that several news items published by the above-mentioned institutions would be re-published by Ikhwanweb.

The thematic section “MB and the West” serves precisely this objective. It contains almost hundred items whose main focus is that of tracing, recommending or reporting the opening of a diplomatic line of dialogue between the Muslim Brotherhood and the US administration. As usual, the content displayed in these pages might be either original or taken from other websites, many of which were mentioned earlier on. Indeed, the first item opening this collection was authored by Amr Hamzawy, founding member of the liberal Freedom Egypt Party and member of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The article originally appeared on Bitter-Lemons and was then re-published on Carnegie website first and then on Ikhwanweb¹²⁸.

Hamzawy's op-ed sets the tone right from the start, its title being “The West and Moderate Islam”, and then proceed to make the case for an engagement with Islamist movements in the region. In his view, after 9/11 a shift was gradually changing western perceptions of political Islam.

127Email conversation with A., young MB blogger, 17th September 2010.

128Hamzawy, Amr. 2005. “The West and Moderate Islam”. *Bitter Lemons*, 2 June. Available at: <http://carnegieendowment.org/2005/06/06/west-and-moderate-islam/2u9d>; also available on Ikhwanweb at: <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=5607>.

From outright rejection to an “operative distinction” between radical and moderate Islamist movements, the West was discovering the pragmatism of Islamist movements which, absent a viable liberal opposition to reach, should be engaged in order to promote democracy in the region and forge diplomatic relations:

[R]ecent changes in Arab Islamist political movements have made it easier for western countries to engage some of them. Throughout the last decade the mainstream of Islamist movements has been moving toward more pragmatism, based on prioritizing gradual democratic reforms as the way ahead for their political integration and as the only viable strategy to challenge the persistent authoritarianism in the Arab world. Furthermore, the new pragmatism among non-violent Islamist movements materializes in an atmosphere of relative openness toward American and European policies in the Arab world, and an initial willingness to engage them less ideologically. Especially for the United States, this change represents a preferable setting for reaching out to the most popular opposition actors in the Arab world and developing a minimum of strategic ties.¹²⁹

Indeed, this would constitute the principal approach deployed especially after the 2005 parliamentary elections, where the MB won 88 seats thus becoming the main political opposition force in the country. Shortly after the electoral results, both the US administration and leading figures of the group were trying to open diplomatic channels. While the State Department was calling for the Egyptian government to elaborate a “legal framework to deal with the Brotherhood”¹³⁰, members of the Muslim Brotherhood were already outlining the necessary procedures to initiate a diplomatic dialogue¹³¹.

Few months after the MB electoral success, in response to numerous reports claiming that the British Foreign Ministry had been in contact with the Muslim Brotherhood since 2002, Ikhwanweb interviewed Khairat el-Shatir. Having denied the existence of any contact between the MB and foreign countries, the interview soon broadened the scope touching upon several issues. Asked about the prospects of dialogue with the West, the deputy-chairman replied as follows:

We believe that the dialogue with the west is the ideal method to bridge the dividing gaps and resolve all grievances. In this regard, we welcome a constructive dialogue that promotes rapprochement among civilizations to avoid an imminent clash. [...] [T]he ultimate humane interest necessitates that we reinforce dialogue and promote peaceful coexistence amongst people of different races, cultures, and origins on the bases of mutual respect and equality, recognizing the distinctive and private ethnic features which makes each culture unique and creative. The Qur'an says “And we set you up as nations

129Hamzawy, Amr. 2005. *Ibidem*.

130Shaheen, Jamal. 2005. “Washington to Ask Egypt to Find a Legal Framework in Dealing with the Muslim Brotherhood”. *Asharq Alawsat*, 22 November. Available at: <http://www.asharq-e.com/print.asp?artid=id2779>; also available on Ikhwanweb at: <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=5437>.

131Abdellah, Mohamed and Blair, Edmund. 2005. “Egypt’s Brothers open to dialogue with US Congress”. *Reuters*, 12 December. Available on Ikhwanweb at: <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=5137>.

and tribes so that you may be able to recognize each other” (Al-Hujrat: 13).¹³²

One does not need too much analytical effort to unpack the cultural essentialism articulated through such a statement. The impending clash of civilizations and the racialization of the entire global population are clear enough indications of the way in which the Muslim Brotherhood is framing such a dialogue with the West. Huntington's civilizational “fault lines” (1993) and colonial epistemology are reproduced almost *verbatim*.

A more articulate prospect for the relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and the West would be provided by the head of MB parliamentary bloc, Saad el-Din al-Katatny. Having noted the sorrow state of such a relation, Katatny identifies several root causes. To begin with, echoing the above-mentioned op-ed by Amr Hamzawy, he laments the lack, in western attitudes towards Islamist movements, of a nuanced approach capable of distinguishing between radical and nonviolent movements. He also points out that western foreign policies, and support for authoritarian regimes in the region, contributed to worsen the situation. Yet Katatny insists that a path may still be traced and, in order to do so, he lays down some recommendations addressing both camps. First, he argues, Islamists need to change how they perceive and how they communicate with the west:

Islamists have to realize that the West is not fundamentally anti-Islamic, and that some pro-democratic movements in the West are in fact willing to engage in dialogue and maintain relations with moderate Islamists, and accept the fact that Islamists and Islamic movements in general are the reflection of the people's true will. [...] Islamists also need to present a clear and unambiguous vision about how the Western presence in the region (on the economic, political, cultural and military levels) will change if the Islamists were to come to power. So far, Islamists' views on these issues have been distorted, either by the media or by Islamists themselves in their inability to communicate their agenda in a Western-friendly format, and even sometimes by the regimes, or the special interest groups opposing the rise of Islamists.¹³³

On the other hand, “the West” must reconsider its position, accept the difference of Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood and engage in a constructive dialogue. The support of moderate Islamist forces in the region, Katatny argues, is the only solution to both authoritarian governments as well as radical extremism:

The West also needs to come to a realization that there will always be differences between the Islamists and the Westerners. However, Islamists will not impose their beliefs or way

132Ikhwanweb. 2006. “El-Shater: We Do Not Promote An Anti Western Agenda”. *Ikhwanweb*, 14 March. <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=930>

133Al-Katatny, Saad. 2006. “Katatny: Dialogue Between Islamists And The West a Necessity”. *Ikhwanweb*, 15 December. <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=936>

of life on Westerners just as Westerners should refrain from doing the same on Islamists. [...] Propping up oppressing regimes will undermine the opportunity for peaceful change and reform and will reinforce the sentiment of the radical Islamists whose cause will become more popular as the support enjoyed by the moderates is not translated into political gain.¹³⁴

The head of MB parliamentary bloc would return upon the issue few months later, publishing no less than a “dialogue manifesto” to improve the relationship between Islamists and the West. Having rehearsed the main arguments exposed in his previous piece, Katatny would conclude his “dialogue manifesto” as follows:

The West has to realize that the “one man, one vote, one time” notion is absurd. If the societies of the region are empowered, and are strong enough to bring Islamists to power, then of course they will be able to remove them if they disapprove of their policy. Islamists experience in professional clubs, student unions and syndicates presents empirical evidence that we are always willing to abide by people's will, and peacefully step down if we are not reelected. [...] Addressing the real problems and “gray areas” with more acceptance of diversity is the key to success in the dialogue between Islamists and the West. Each side of the dialogue should be willing to revisit its stances, and look for alternative policies and positions so as to contribute positively to this dialogue.¹³⁵

It is important to reflect upon the expressions in quotation marks which Katatny argues against, for they point to what in my view is a crucial dimension of this dialogue. Indeed, thanks to the constant monitoring of the knowledge produced by specialized research institutes and magazines, the Muslim Brotherhood was positioning itself in relation to a major scholarly debate raging at that time within counter-terrorism and policy-making circles. The expressions in quotation marks represent quite clearly the different views animating such a debate, whose main issue was how to deal with Islamists: rejection or cautious engagement. As Lynch reports, though framed in a slightly different way, within counterterrorism circles the matter of contention was whether the Ikhwan had to be regarded as a “conveyor belt”, leading to further radicalization in the region, or as a “firewall”, channeling discontent away from radical forms of Islamist politics (Lynch 2010: 468). As expected, such a debate soon developed well beyond the confines of academic circles and publications, reaching the pages of media such as *Foreign Policy* and *Foreign Affairs*. Indeed, both camps seem to be constituted by a loose network of expertise, ranging from journalists to research analysts and political scientists.

On the one hand, there was the usually virulent and highly proactive network of Islamophobes as well as *nouveaux intellectuels*, constantly warning about an Islamofascist invasion

134A1-Katatny, Saad. 2006. *Ibidem*.

135A1-Katatny, Saad. 2007. “Dialogue manifesto [sic] Between Islamists And The West”. *Ikhwanweb*, 27 March. <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=934>

of the West (see Berman 2004; 2007; 2010a; 2010b; Vidino 2010). On the other hand, a much more accommodating camp was recommending the US administration to engage in dialogue with the MB (see Hamid 2010a, 2010b; Ottaway 2008; Ottaway and Hamzawy 2008). Leiken and Brooke's work, in particular, would declare an end to “the anxious and often fruitless search for Muslim moderates”, and call for “policy-makers” to “recognize” in the Muslim Brotherhood a “notable opportunity” (Leiken and Brooke 2007: 108). Needless to say, their work was highly appreciated. Reporting a related news item, an Ikhwanweb editorial comment argues that their paper was “one of the most stimulating and accurate accounts, and helped to open a serious and rational debate about our movement”¹³⁶.

The US political scientist Marc Lynch was particularly active in promoting dialogue on both fronts, urging the US administration to engage with the MB, albeit in a prudent way (2010), and publishing a “memorandum” on *Foreign Policy* addressed to former MB Chairman, Mahdi Akef, where he advised him on “how to talk to America”:

Watch what you say [...] Target the middle ground of sensible, pragmatic Americans who believe in democracy, worry about terrorism, and have genuine questions about your commitments to the former and against the latter. [...] American policy – makes need to know that you can coexist with secularists and express your disapproval through peaceful, non coercive means. Be a firewall, not a transmission belt: ultimately, the reason America are contemplating turning to you is out of an interest in combating Islamic extremism. [...] What are you really doing to prevent such radicalization from happening? Here’s one way to think about it: the Brotherhood could either be a firewall (“capturing “the hearts and minds of Muslims within a moderate program and dissuading them from turning to radicalism), or transmission belt (catapulting Muslims along the path to radicalism). Which are you?

(Lynch 2007)

Lynch's Memo for Mahdi Akef, then Chairman of the Muslim Brotherhood, would later be published on Ikhwanweb¹³⁷ to which an editorial commentary followed suit. In a point-by-point response, Ahmad Fahmy stressed once again the group's genuine commitment to democracy and its moderate stance:

In his memo, Lynch urges Akef to “use your political capital” and remain committed to democratic processes. But I feel that our commitment to democracy should not be the real concern of Western intellectuals and policymakers; Our belief in democratic processes is ideological, not tactical. [...] The Muslim Brotherhood is a moderate, mainstream movement that is capable of overshadowing radical ideologies, yet we are only able to do so effectively in an atmosphere of freedom. The brotherhood is playing a unique role in the world today. It acts as a safety valve—and sometimes the valve needs to release

136Salam, Khaled. 2007. “The Debate About The Moderate Muslim Brotherhood Continues”. *Ikhwanweb*, 16 April. <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=599>

137See Lynch (2007) for the original article. Also available on Ikhwanweb at: <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=13835>

excess pressure to avoid explosion.¹³⁸

Following Saba Mahmood, one could argue that the primary function served by this scholarship is policing a subaltern group in the provinces of Empire (2006). The disciplinary encirclement of the Muslim Brotherhood by this network of truly bio-political institutions -governing, that is, the conduct of a political movement- becomes even more evident when one investigates further their connections to think tanks. Rather than real-time communication, here one has a sustained correspondence, revolving around the assessment of various drafts of party platforms and political programs which the Ikhwan distributed for them to be commented on. It is here that the political language of the Muslim Brotherhood is molded in the cast of western liberal democracy.

Since 2006, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace published a series of reports assessing the documents released and circulated by the Muslim Brotherhood. The first publication, in particular, highlighted what in the authors' words were "gray zones" in the ideological outlook of the organization: violence as a means for political goals, the place of religion in the public realm and that of Islamic Shari'a in the constitution, political pluralism and civil rights, the rights of religious minorities and women (Brown *et al.* 2006). To be sure, neither the evaluator nor the assessed cared to mention anything related to economics, or to even outline the prospects of alternative solutions for some of the dramatic socio-economic problems affecting the country. Free market economy and structural adjustments usually do not even need to be put on the table for discussion, it seems, while the only boxes in need to be ticked are those assessing whether the subaltern subject meets the required standards of western liberal-democracy (see Brown and Hamzawy 2008; Hamzawy *et al.* 2007; Ottaway and Hamzawy 2008).

In the previous chapter, I discussed Asef Bayat's definition of post-Islamism "as both a condition and project" striving "to marry Islam with individual choice and freedom, with democracy and modernity" (2010: 244). Reconsidering his argument in light of what has thus far been said, his concept seems to be highly problematic. As I already argued, the encounter of Islam with democracy and modernity does not happen in a historical vacuum; neither are these terms universal and unchanging, but are rather constituted by a complex, and often contradictory, ensemble of agents, practices and discourses which are historically situated. The encounter Bayat prescribes for Islamist movements in the region, then, is precisely what the Ikhwan have been doing since the 1970s. The only problem is that it does not look like post-Islamism, whatever this might mean, but resembles much more closely to a nativist articulation of neoliberalism.

¹³⁸Fahmy, Ahmad. 2007. "MB responds to Marc Lynch's Memo Published in Foreign Policy". *Ikhwanweb*, 22 October. <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=14436>

If anything, as Dabashi had it, political Islam seems to be trapping itself into a “colonially fabricated binary” between “Islam and the West”, so that “when the subaltern speaks s/he speaks the language of its oppressors” (2009: 175). And this is where it becomes potentially self-defeating, for it exposes itself to a series of contradictions putting its hegemony in a permanent state of crisis. Provided that one get rid of the postmodern dogma about the end of class conflict, it is possible to see that, by relying on a culturalist conception of identity very much in line with the requirements of western identity politics, at times flatly modeled upon US census, the MB is (rather conveniently) blind to class conflict. This blindspot poses a tremendous challenge to their hegemonic claims, for by erasing class inequalities especially within the organization the MB exposes itself to a permanent crisis of political representation. This process is fully unfolding as we speak and, as I hope to show in the last chapter, it was already underway well before the demise of the Mubarak regime.

Conclusion

Let me now briefly sum up the arguments treated in this chapter. I first argued that the launch of a website such as Ikhwanweb enabled the movement to challenge the official narration of the MB by the Egyptian regime. It can do so not just due to the power of communication, but rather - and most importantly, I argue - because of its capacity to record statements, events and documents. Thanks to the commodification of digital archival technologies, the MB appropriated and capitalized on storage capacities to carve out a public space for self-representation; one that they could not gain by relying solely on mainstream media. Serving as a technological infrastructure, a “technical a priori”, the website allowed the MB to articulate their political discourse. This archival capacity simultaneously empowered the MB and troubled Egyptian authorities.

I then proceeded to trace the power relations Ikhwanweb is traversed and constituted by. Throughout the chapter, what I hoped to convey is the ambivalent and contradictory nature of the group's engagement with new media. If on the one hand it has enabled them to address the knowledge produced about the group within western research and policy-circles, on the other hand the group was subjected to what I referred to as a network of bio-political institutions, seeking to discipline the group (and mold it) according to western conception of democracy. In the process, I also tried to refine my critical engagement with authors dealing with new media and social movements. I further elaborated upon Kittler's argument, whose notion of discourse network should be replaced with that of topology; I also revised Bayat's reflections on post-Islamism, arguing that political Islam cannot be understood without examining the encounters and dialogues with the disciplinary matrix of neo-liberalism.

In this respect, the lack of critical awareness exposes the movement to a series of contradictions, and puts it in a permanent crisis of representation. The focus on cultural identity is locking the group into a self-essentializing dichotomy, making it blind to class conflict and inequalities. What this implies is that ordinary members and especially young ones are always capable of disarticulating the hegemonic claims of their leadership. Although at the time of writing, President Morsi appears to embody the ultimate victory of political Islam, I argue that his movement is in a constant crisis of political representation. However, before looking at how this process unfolded, especially thanks to MB bloggers, the next chapter will describe Ikhwanonline, the MB official website in Arabic, and then compare it with Ikhwanweb.

Chapter 5

Ikhwanonline: A Comparison between the MB Official Websites in English and Arabic

In the previous chapter, I examined Ikhwanweb, the MB official website in English. The present chapter draws a comparison between the former and its counterpart in Arabic. Though Ikhwanweb might be known to English-speaking readers, Ikhwanonline is in fact the MB official website and precedes the English version. Ikhwanweb was launched in late 2005, whereas Ikhwanonline was established in 2003. This website comes after an experimental phase in which small branches, individuals and groups of MB members started using the internet and digital technologies to run and maintain websites affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood.

These media outlets tried to constitute an online presence for the organization. However, they would often be short-lived, as they relied upon the voluntary work of ordinary members not fully supported by the organization. After a long and dispersive series of trials, and following the growing demands of the grassroots level for an official online presence, the Muslim Brotherhood decided to launch its official website in 2003. Ikhwanweb, the MB official website in English, would follow after two years.

But why did the Ikhwan feel the need to have two versions of its official website? To begin with, they were set up and launched in two different periods. Also, these websites aim at reaching out two different audiences and pursue two fundamentally different agendas. While Ikhwanweb was established to address foreign readers and, most importantly, the international community of decision-makers, Ikhwanonline seems to remain within the traditional path of its organization. The two websites opt for distinct approaches with regard to religious discourse and its role in the ideological outlook of the movement. The English version seems to downplay what the Arabic website displays as one of its main features.

But why are there such different approaches? Is this the result of a duplicitous communication strategy adopted by the Muslim Brotherhood? Or are such differences determined by other dynamics at play? In order to address these questions and draw a comparison between the websites, I will first need to outline a brief historical background of Ikhwanonline. Having summarily described it, I will then proceed to examine its content in detail. Finally, the last section will compare and contrast the main features of these two websites, arguing that the differences derive from a constitutive tension between two conflicting political visions.

Ikhwanonline: Brief Historical Background and Description

Ikhwanonline¹³⁹ is the official website of the Muslim Brotherhood. The website is in Arabic and predates Ikhwanweb: the former was launched in April 2003, whereas the latter in October 2005. To some extent, as far as communication strategies and practices of the Muslim Brotherhood are concerned, the launch of Ikhwanonline constitutes a moment of consolidation. The website is a result of a long and diverse range of media outlets, a five-year period in which the Muslim Brotherhood were experimenting with the cyberspace.

The first attempt dates back to 1998 but was short-lived. In fact, among the successive experiments several would follow the same route. Websites such as *ashahed2000* and *Islam is the Solution* were founded by individual members or a small group of members mostly based in the same city. Having been launched in early 2000, they will last no longer than two years. The websites were maintained with the voluntary work of their creators, they were often registered at free-hosting providers and mainly served as repositories for religious and traditional material such as speeches, sermons and songs.

Two notable exceptions in this regard are represented by Amlalomma¹⁴⁰ and Ikhwan.net¹⁴¹. Both websites were launched respectively in 2000 and 2001 and they are still active and regularly updated. The former is an MB-related news website based in Alexandria and mostly focusing on the metropolitan area. Ikhwan.net was launched in 2001 as a forum and then developed into a website collecting speeches and talks of MB leading figures. Later on, the website further evolved through the launch of many related platforms, each one specializing on a specific issue or service. While the main website remains Ikhwan.net, which serves both as a portal and a host for the MB official forum¹⁴², other domains were established to create a website on Hasan al-Banna¹⁴³, founding father of the Ikhwan, and Ikhwanwiki¹⁴⁴, a wikipedia-style collaborative encyclopedia on the Muslim Brotherhood. Following these experiments, other websites were launched, most of the times being related either to a specific area or electoral consultations¹⁴⁵.

Thus, Ikhwanonline comes out of this experimental phase, when several media outlets were established and maintained by the free labour of ordinary members who took the individual initiative or organized in small groups to realize them. However, given the number of failed and short-lived attempts, there was emerging a growing consensus for the establishment of an official

139<http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Default.aspx>

140<http://amlalommah.net/new/>

141<http://www.ikhwan.net/forum/index.php>

142<http://www.ikhwan.net/forum/>

143NB the following domain has been disabled: <http://www.hassanalbanna.org/>

144<http://www.ikhwanwiki.com/index.php>

145For a comprehensive account of MB-related media see Hafez, Ahmad. 2008. "Muslim Brotherhood Websites". *Ikhwanweb*. <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=18865>

online presence which would function as a general window to and a mouthpiece for the Muslim Brotherhood. As Hafez recounts, the decision to launch an official website was also a response to this widely-shared demand, coming from the grassroots level of the organization, for an official presence online:

After years of Muslim Brotherhood web experiences, these experiences didn't gain a considerable success because they were spearheaded by energetic volunteers. Due to demands of the group's grassroots for a Muslim Brotherhood official website that can work as its mouthpiece, several workshops were held to formulate a prototype for the group's website. These workshops expanded to include some workers in the group's media and political sections in governorates.¹⁴⁶

Rather predictably, just like other MB-related media outlets, this website, too, was targeted by the government and its security apparatus. On 16 May 2004, the Egyptian authorities raided the flat from where the website was managed, arresting the then editor in chief, Gamal Nassar, and seizing the servers. As a consequence of the servers being seized, the website remained offline for two days and had to be completely re-launched¹⁴⁷.

Ikhwanonline presents itself as the official website of the Muslim Brotherhood right from the start. The formal and aesthetic elements, even the chromatic choices, appeal to both Islamic heritage, in general, and the tradition of the Muslim Brotherhood in particular. Next to a banner linked to the MB weekly newsletter, the main header of the website is composed by the traditional symbol of the group. A green circle encloses two swords crossed under the Qur'an, the words Muslim Brotherhood and their classic slogan: "Be prepared!". The green, the traditional colour of Islam, is another prominently featured element, serving as a contrast against the white background. Along the same line, the date is indicated following both the Islamic and Gregorian calendars, the former being absent from Ikhwanweb, the English website, which only uses the western calendar.

One element worth being noted is that there are space available for advertising. This is something completely absent from Ikhwanweb, the MB official website in English, and a novel addition for its Arabic counterpart. The issuing of advertising spaces might be related to the fact that, after the creation of the MB political party, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), the religious branch of the organization is seeking to obtain the legal status of an NGO¹⁴⁸. In line with the requirements of the web 2.0, Ikhwanonline has established an online presence in both multimedia platforms and social networks. It has a Youtube account¹⁴⁹ with 2,300 subscribers, a regularly

146Hafez, Ahmad. 2008. *Ibidem*.

147Hafez, Ahmad. 2008. *Ibidem*.

148Ikhwanweb. 2012. "Muslim Brotherhood Seeks Registration as an NGO". *Ikhwanweb*. <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=30154>

149<http://www.youtube.com/user/ikhwanonlinetawasol/featured>

updated profile on Twitter¹⁵⁰ with more than 50,000 followers and one on Facebook¹⁵¹ followed by more than 200,000 users.

The way in which Ikhwanonline organizes and displays its content is worth being described at some length. In this case, one is confronted with an archival media built according to different imperatives and requirements. Along with the above-mentioned elements, the website is organized in ten thematic sections that can be accessed through a navigation bar placed under the main header. Each section groups items dealing with a specific aspect of the movement, with the most important ones being placed on the right side of the layout. They also contain further subdivisions and its content may be both originally produced by the editorial staff of Ikhwanonline, collected from other media outlets, even submitted by users. In fact, the website encourages its readership to submit contributions. All formats are accepted – be they audio, video or text- and can be submitted by clicking on a small banner placed right under the navigation bar in the homepage¹⁵².

Starting from the right side of the navigation bar, the first section one encounters serves as a portal to the main news items and press releases officially issued by the organization. This section -called *Bawaab al-Ikhwan*¹⁵³ (Ikhwan Portal)- is further subdivided into four groups. *Ra'i al-Ikhwan*¹⁵⁴ (Ikhwan Opinion) is a collection of editorials commenting upon current affairs at national and regional level. These items often lack an author and thus represent the editorial line of the website. The second group hosts the archive of Ikhwanonline weekly newsletter¹⁵⁵, which consists of official statements released once a week by the “Murshid al-‘amm” (Supreme Guide), Mohammad Badie. Two other subgroups complete this section, both dealing with the internal life of the Muslim brotherhood. *Akhbar al-Ikhwan*¹⁵⁶ (Ikhwan News) is a collection of reports on the political activities of the group covering all levels of its organization, from the announcements made by its leadership to the initiatives taken by small branches in the country. *Mujtama' al-Ikhwan*¹⁵⁷ (Ikhwan Society) is the last group and focuses on the community life of the Muslim Brotherhood, including obituaries or celebrating events such as weddings or the achievement of a university degree.

The main section about MB current affairs is immediately followed by one devoted to the missionary work, or *Da'wah* (Invite to Islam). The section is called *Da'wah wa Du'aat*¹⁵⁸ (Invite [to

150<https://twitter.com/ikhwantawasol>

151<https://www.facebook.com/ikhwanonline>

152<http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.aspx?SecID=393&ArtID=126005>

153*Bawaab al-Ikhwan* (Ikhwan Portal): <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Section.aspx?SecID=111#>

154*Ra'i al-Ikhwan* (Ikhwan Opinion): <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Section.aspx?SecID=118>

155*Risalat al-Ussu'* (Weekly Newsletter): http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Archive.aspx?Sec_ID=213

156*Akhbar al-Ikhwan* (Ikhwan News): <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Section.aspx?SecID=101>

157*Mujtama' al-Ikhwan* (Ikhwan Society): <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Section.aspx?SecID=105>

158*Da'wah wa Du'aat* (Invite [to Islam] and Proselytizers): <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Section.aspx?SecID=111#>

Islam] and Proselytizers) and is further divided into two groups. The first one¹⁵⁹ is entirely devoted to the founding father of the movement, Hasan al Banna, and includes his original writings as well as other authors' works about him. The other subgroup, *Rawdah al-Du'aat*¹⁶⁰ (Advocates' Garden/School), is made of a collection of texts focusing on the value and practice of missionary work in Islamic thought in general, and as one of the main features of the Muslim Brotherhood political activism in particular. It is intended as a kind of toolbox, where the reader can find practical advice on how to embed the missionary work in his/her life.

News items and current affairs are also the focus of two following sections. The first one, *Taqaarir wa Hiwaraat*¹⁶¹ (Reportages and Interviews), collects original reportages and interviews realized directly by the editorial staff of Ikhwanonline. Although not exclusively, the issues covered in this subgroup mainly revolve around domestic politics. At the time of writing, for example, the main items being featured regard the release of the Egyptian soldiers kidnapped in Sinai¹⁶² and an interview conducted with Palestinian prisoner Ayman Sharawna¹⁶³. The other section providing news is simply called *Akhbar*¹⁶⁴ (News) and has a rather broader scope. It is further divided into four subgroups, each providing a specific selection of news. *Akher al-Akhbar*¹⁶⁵ (Latest News) is a newsfeed about Egyptian politics, whereas *Muhafazaat Masr*¹⁶⁶ (Egypt Districts) is a collection of news coming from different districts and cities. The news section also includes two other subgroups dealing respectively with Palestine¹⁶⁷, Arab region and international affairs¹⁶⁸.

As one proceeds from right to left, the subjects treated by the thematic sections become more related to the daily life of ordinary members. Two sections are devoted to young people and family matters. *Shabaab wa Gami'aat*¹⁶⁹ (Youth and Universities) is entirely focused on issues related to higher education, university and related policies. The items contained in this section seem to be reports written by local correspondents or MB members active in student unions¹⁷⁰. As for the other subgroup, it is called *Waahah al-'Usrah*¹⁷¹ (Family Oasis) and is clearly devoted to

159 *Al-Banna wa al-Ikhwan* (Al-Banna and the Ikhwan): <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Section.aspx?SecID=111>

160 *Rawdah al-Du'aat* (Advocates' Garden/School): <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Section.aspx?SecID=110>

161 *Taqaariri wa Hiwaraat* (Reportages and Interviews): <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Section.aspx?SecID=104>

162 Ibrahim, Sameh. 2013. "The Egyptian Street: Release of Soldiers stabilizes Egypt's Honour" (in Arabic). *Ikhwanonline*, 23 May. <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.aspx?ArtID=150509&SecID=104>

163 Ikhwanonline. 2013. "Ikhwanonline in dialogue with released prisoner Ayman Sharawna" (in Arabic). *Ikhwanonline*, 24 April. <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.aspx?ArtID=147275&SecID=104>

164 *Akhbar* (News): <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Section.aspx?SecID=102>

165 *Akher al-Akhbar* (Latest News): <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Section.aspx?SecID=102>

166 *Muhafazaat Masr* (Egypt Districts): <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Section.aspx?SecID=125>

167 *Palestine Al'an* (Palestine Now): <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Section.aspx?SecID=122>

168 *'Arab wa 'Ajam* (Arab and non-Arab): <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Section.aspx?SecID=109>

169 *Shabaab wa Gami'aat* (Youth and Universities): <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Section.aspx?SecID=107>

170 See for example Abdel-Raziq, Hossam. 2013. "Sohag University Director visits Food Store and Kitchen at University Campuses" (in Arabic). *Ikhwanonline*, 25 May 2013. <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.aspx?ArtID=150694&SecID=107>

171 *Waahah al-'Usrah* (Family Oasis): <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Section.aspx?SecID=108>

family issues. Here, the subjects may vary but for the most part the content consists of readers' letters seeking advice from experts on such issues as sexual life¹⁷², love¹⁷³ and children education¹⁷⁴.

Earlier on, while describing the formal features of the website, I mentioned that the editorial staff encourages their readership to submit personal contributions via a dedicated page. Right in the middle of the navigation bar, a thematic section gathers and displays all the users' contributions. The section is further divided into two subgroups. Each group collects readers messages and letters according to age and, possibly, internal hierarchies. *Ara'a Horrah*¹⁷⁵ (Free Opinions) consists of a collection of articles authored by leading MB figures such as Walid Shalaby¹⁷⁶, a media advisor to the MB chairman, where *Bi Qalaam al-Zuwaar*¹⁷⁷ (Written by Readers) contains messages from ordinary members. The former can be distinguished by the latter because each article includes the authors' photo, whereas users' posts, while indicating the author's name, are often accompanied by generic pictures.

The following thematic section is simply called *Al-Maziid*¹⁷⁸ (Extra) and is focused on cultural issues, entertainment and sport. It is divided into three subgroups, each of which deal with the above-mentioned topics. '*Alam al-Riyadah*¹⁷⁹ (Sport World) is a collection of news item focusing on sport and youth-related issues. *Thaqafah wa Funun*¹⁸⁰ (Culture and the Arts) provides news about the publication of new books, it reports on cultural debates and historical heritage, and it features articles about film production and theatrical plays. *Al-Mudhikakhanah*¹⁸¹ (Comedy House) is a collection of satirical cartoons, jokes and tales. Not only does this section contain satirical fiction but it also features some articles dealing with the importance of irony and satire¹⁸², and putting them in relation to the history of the Muslim Brotherhood¹⁸³.

The last two sections on the left side of the navigation bar provide links to the MB branches in districts and cities throughout the country and to the official website of Goma'a Amin. *Mawaqi'*

172See for example Ummah al-Rahman. 2013. "My Son watches porn websites" (in Arabic). *Ikhwanonline*. <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.aspx?ArtID=150138&SecID=108>

173See for example Mee Mahmoud. 2013. "How to choose the Love of your Life?" (in Arabic). *Ikhwanonline*. <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.aspx?ArtID=138930&SecID=108>

174See for example Yahya, Usama. 2013. "Dr. Usama Yahya writes: on the Children Bill of Rights" (in Arabic). *Ikhwanonline*. <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.aspx?ArtID=150627&SecID=108>

175*Ara'a Horrah* (Free Opinions):

176See for example Shalaby, Walid. 2013. "Complete Losers ... and the National and Political Bankruptcy". *Ikhwanonline*. <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.aspx?ArtID=150764&SecID=113#>

177*Bi Qalaam al-Zuwaar* (Written by Readers): http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Archive.aspx?Sec_ID=393

178*Maziid* (Extra): <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Section.aspx?SecID=108#>

179'*Alam al-Riyadah* (Sport World): <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Section.aspx?SecID=126>

180*Thaqafah wa Funun* (Culture and the Arts): <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Section.aspx?SecID=106>

181*Al-Mudhikakhanah* (Comedy House): <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Section.aspx?SecID=121>

182See for example Badawy, Gamal Abdel Ghaffar. 2011. "The Comment ... and its artistic use to Laughter" (in Arabic). *Ikhwanonline*. <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.aspx?ArtID=93532&SecID=121>

183See for example Kahaala, Mahy al-Din. 2009. "The Muslim Brotherhood and the Making of Laughter" (in Arabic). *Ikhwanonline*. <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.aspx?ArtID=49821&SecID=121>

Ikhwaaniyya (Ikhwan Websites) consists of a drop-down menu through which it is possible to access a series of MB-related websites. The list is mainly composed by small websites developed and maintained by branches of the Ikhwan in the diverse districts and cities, such as Alexandria, Suez, Aswan and Qalyubeyya. However, along with branch websites, the list also includes other media outlets, such as Ikhwanweb for example, directly affiliated with the organization. Finally, as mentioned earlier on, the last section only consists of a link connecting to the official website of Gomaa Amin Abdel Aziz, widely known Islamist historian from Alexandria, member of the Muslim Brotherhood and third deputy-chairman of Mohammad Badie¹⁸⁴.

Here one is dealing with a different kind of website, which imagines an equally different kind of audience. Ikhwanonline does not even need to have an editorial founding statement, for it articulates no rupture, no discursive shift, as in the case of Khaled Hamza and the launch of Ikhwanweb (2009). Everything on Ikhwanonline, from its aesthetics to the choice of subjects and the way they are covered, is intended to articulate authenticity and traditional values. Unlike Ikhwanweb, the MB official website in Arabic represent continuity rather than rupture, a constant tribute to the tradition of the Muslim Brotherhood. In the last section of this chapter, I will pause more at length on this comparison, as it seems to articulate a distinction between religious (*da'awi*) and political (*siyyasi*) outlook which has been a recurrent topic of discussion among the Muslim Brotherhood. However, before proceeding with the comparison, it is important to reflect in a more detailed fashion on the features described above.

Analysis of the Content

What clearly emerges from this brief description of the website is that Ikhwanonline primarily aims at catering an audience that is completely different from that of its English counterpart. While Ikhwanweb was intended to reach out Western policy-making circles, research institutions and specialized publications, the Arabic website serves as the main portal for the members of the Muslim Brotherhood. As such, it is structured according to different requirements and, most importantly, it imagines a different kind of audience. Although, as noted before, political matters remain issues of primary concern, the range of subjects covered by Ikhwanonline is much broader and includes the everyday concerns of ordinary members as well as many aspects of the community life of the Muslim Brotherhood. These topics are completely absent from the pages of Ikhwanweb, the MB official website in English, whose main concern is represented by the production of knowledge about their organization and their representation in western decision-making circles.

¹⁸⁴Essam el-Din, Gamal. 2010. "Changing Brotherhood Faces". *Al Ahram Weekly*, issue no. 984. <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2010/984/eg7.htm>

However, before drawing a comparison which could also arrive at some general conclusions, it is necessary to pause at some length on the website and its content, and look at how topics are framed, and how language and register are used to represent them. To do so, the discussion will start from where it ended. The thematic sections presented above will be further fleshed out, taking a selection of items for each one of them so as to examine their main features. What will emerge from this analysis, I argue, is a more conservative orientation or, to be more precise, a greater emphasis on the religious ethos and vision of the Muslim Brotherhood. Once again, if Ikhwanweb intended to produce a shift in the discourse of the organization, its counterpart in Arabic serves the opposite function. There is no such shift in Ikhwanonline, for it represents continuity rather than rupture: it deploys Islamic principles, and even aesthetics, putting emphasis on the religious ethos with which the engagement with worldly affairs should be infused; it celebrates the tradition of the Muslim Brotherhood, showing how it is embedded into the social fabric and practically engaged with everyday life.

This rootedness finds a plastic representation in the navigation bar, where a drop-down menu opens up a list of Ikhwan-related media outlets. The items listed comprise nodes on the internet, such as Ikhwanweb for example, as well as several websites developed and maintained by small branches of the Muslim Brotherhood based in various governorates and city districts. Out of 22 items, 18 are territorially-based websites, developed and maintained by MB sections in governorates such as Qalyubiyya¹⁸⁵, Alexandria¹⁸⁶, Aswan¹⁸⁷ and city districts¹⁸⁸. It is important to stress that these websites are independent from Ikhwanonline: a cursory look shows that they have their own domains and adopt a diverse range of editorial, technical and aesthetic choices. To put it simply, they do not emanate from a central structure, nor do they follow any given guideline or template; they are rather inserted into a network whose main node is constituted by Ikhwanonline.

That the latter acts as the main nodal point of such a network can be seen from the fact that, while Ikhwanonline links to each one of these websites, they all link back to Ikhwanonline. In other words, in this particular network the latter is accessible from 18 different websites, while the others are only accessible through Ikhwanonline, which therefore acquires a position of prominence. In this regard, the MB Arabic website functions as the main access point to a topology of MB-related media¹⁸⁹. The concept of topology has already been proposed in the previous chapter, where it was

185<http://www.kbwindow.com/>

186<http://www.amlalommah.net/>

187<http://www.sahwetwaswan.com/>

188See for example this website developed by MB members in East Cairo: <http://moraselon.net/>

189It is important to note that such a list is not comprehensive: other platforms are not included, for the items listed only consist of websites officially representing MB branches. To give just one example, while *Ikhwanweb* regularly features in this list of MB official media, other outlets such as *Ikhwanwiki* (www.ikhwanwiki.com) are not included.

used to define the archival constellations constitutive of Ikhwanweb. Here I contend that it is possible to examine another archival deployment of digital technologies, for new media can map and visualize spatial constructions. And while a list of items in a drop-down menu does not constitute a particularly articulate visualization technique, it is precisely through it that Ikhwanonline appears to contain all of these websites. In doing so, through a list of websites Ikhwanonline is able to reproduce the territorial presence of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The need to represent the internal life of the movement in all of its aspects seems to determine the way in which other thematic sections are structured. This is particularly evident once the first section presented above is considered. *Bawwabah al-Ikhwan*¹⁹⁰ (Ikhwan Portal) can be regarded as the main feature of Ikhwanonline, since it displays a comprehensive collection of resources providing information about leading figures and their political activities. Within this thematic section, a number of items were uploaded during the first years after the launch of Ikhwanonline. These pages profile members of the *Maktab al-Irshad* (Guidance Office) of the Muslim Brotherhood. It is interesting to note what traits are highlighted in order to construct their biographies. Along with their position within the organization and their marital status, a list of trials and detentions as well as the person's missionary work are the main criteria through which their persona is constructed.

For example, the profile of Mohammad Badie, Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, lists, along with academic qualifications, his work as a union leader as well as the lawsuits he had to face¹⁹¹. Likewise, the profile of Mahmoud Ezzat, prominent member of the MB *Maktab al-Irshad* and deputy-chairman of the Supreme Guide, having described his long history of militancy within the movement, especially in the education sector, goes on to illustrate his “scientific and religious interests”:

Several researches and activities in the field of fighting infectious diseases in both Egypt and England. Several researches in the epidemic diseases in Egypt such as cholera. Dawa-related interests in the fields of constructive education and students”. Religious and Scientific Affairs within the group, public activities, human rights, and charitable medical activities. He is the deputy board chairman of the Islamic Medical Society.¹⁹²

Along the same lines, a page on Abdel Rahman el-Barr shows, along with religious scholarship and qualifications, his “missionary history”. El-Barr's practice of missionary work went well beyond the

190 *Bawwabah al-Ikhwan* (Ikhwan Portal): <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Section.aspx?SecID=101#>

191 Ikhwanonline. 2006. “Dr. Mohammad Badie in the Top 100 Arab Scientists” (in Arabic). *Ikhwanonline*, 13 May. <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.aspx?ArtID=20323&SecID=214>

192 Ikhwanonline. 2006. “Mahmoud Ezzat: Campaigner for Awareness” (in Arabic). *Ikhwanonline*, 15 April. <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.aspx?ArtID=19569&SecID=214>

national confines of Egypt, for he traveled many times in US and Italy to meet with local Islamic centres and deliver speeches and lectures¹⁹³. Interestingly enough, when compared with other leaders' profiles, Morsi's appears to be the less articulate. In fact, it is rather short and only mentions among his achievements the participation to parliamentary commissions of inquiry¹⁹⁴.

The concept of da'wah appears to be a prominent feature of Ikhwanonline. As noted earlier on, the website devotes an entire thematic section to the praxis of missionary work and its relevance. This is something that renders Ikhwanonline completely different from its English counterpart, which downplays rather than emphasise the religious discourse. One of the items contained in this section is an editorial authored by Waleed Shalaby, media advisor of the Supreme Guide and director of Ikhwanonline da'wah office. The piece is a long portrait of Hasan al-Banna, outlining the main tenets of his thought and, most importantly, showing his complete commitment to the practice of missionary work:

Indeed, he was a truly unique example of da'awi, expanding his thought through a life of sacrifice, work and practice to achieve victory, until da'wah became his whole life, and he became a master of it as it should be with any da'awi. He put da'wah before his personal concerns, trying his best, giving himself to others, spending time with them and sparing no effort to improve his thought and transmit it.¹⁹⁵

The article continues along this line, combining the work of MB historians on the subject with Qur'anic quotes and tracing the religious ethos with which the founding figure of the Muslim Brotherhood infused his political practice and thought. While his towering figure obviously represents a huge portion of this section, the content also includes announcements of events and seminars on the history of the Muslim Brotherhood¹⁹⁶, and editorials focusing on other leading historical figures¹⁹⁷.

The section devoted to the concept of da'wah is further enriched by several subgroups providing not only theoretical guidance with resources and books, but also offering practical advice on a vast range of topics and issues. The items collected here may be biographical accounts of historical figures such as Sheykh Youssef el-Degawy¹⁹⁸, they may take the familiar ask-the-expert format, where a reader poses a question to a religious expert. Here one is confronted with an

193Ikhwanonline. 2009. "Dr. Abdel-Rahman el-Barr" (in Arabic). *Ikhwanonline*, 21 December. <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.aspx?ArtID=58067&SecID=214>

194Ikhwanonline. 2009. "Dr. Mohammad Morsi" (in Arabic). *Ikhwanonline*, 21 December. <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.aspx?ArtID=58083&SecID=214>

195Shalaby, Waleed. 2002. "Waleed Shalaby Writes: Hasan al-Banna as I Saw Him" (in Arabic). *Ikhwanonline*, 12 February. <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.aspx?ArtID=34427&SecID=372>

196See all items listed under the tag "History of Ikhwan" at: http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Archive.aspx?Sec_ID=373

197See all items listed under the tag "Witness of the Path" at: http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Archive.aspx?Sec_ID=372

198Sha'eeb, al-Sayyid. 2012. "Youssef al-Degawy, Faqih of Missionary Search" (in Arabic). *Ikhwanonline*, 16 February 2012. <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.aspx?ArtID=101472&SecID=110>

enormous range of questions, asking whether Islam allows to enter cinema¹⁹⁹ or work in the banking sector²⁰⁰, to postpone pregnancy for study-related issues²⁰¹ or refuse to cast one's vote in the elections. It is particularly worth being noted the response given to the latter question by Abdelrahman el-Barr, religious scholar and leading intellectual figure of the Muslim Brotherhood:

[A]mong the duty of a Muslim there is living in any society if this positively combines to solve the problems of such a society according to the Islamic perspective, as a consequence if one has the chance to vote representatives of the Ummah to decide over legal affairs, choose the government and redefine its value [...] the [Islamic] legal perspective is that this is a chance not to be missed. [...] [T]he participation to an electoral competition, by casting one's vote, is a type of greater jihad, for in it there is an effort to attempt to serve Islam, the nation and ordinary people as a whole.²⁰²

Thus, despite the emphasis on religious ethos and discourse, here one is confronted with a rather worldly, secular articulation of the meaning of missionary work, or *da'wah*. In fact, in his legal opinion el-Barr defines political participation as “a kind of greater jihad”, conceiving the latter as an intellectual as well as spiritual engagement which the Muslim should practice²⁰³. Such an engagement is conflated with national parliamentary politics, and political participation is framed and legitimized by religious authorities. The religious ethos, the commitment to live by it and spread its message within society, are enacted through participation and activism. This religious articulation of political praxis has already been noted by scholars such as Carrie Rosefsky-Wickham, who has rightly regarded it as a crucial element to explain the mobilizational capacity of the Muslim brotherhood (2002). Here it is important to stress that such a concept prominently features on Ikhwanonline while being nearly absent from its English counterpart.

There is another aspect that, once the two websites are compared, is treated in a completely different way: sexuality and gender. Once again, Ikhwanonline devotes to such a subject a thematic section. Needless to say, the sexual identities and gender orientations being covered in this grouping are strictly heteronormative, for homosexuality and transexuality are not even taken into consideration. What is implicitly articulated here is also the subjectivity of heterosexual women, who are assigned exclusively to the sphere of family and sentimental affairs. The section title,

199Ikhwanonline. 2010. “Right to Enter to Cinemas” (in Arabic). *Ikhwanonline*, 25 September. <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.aspx?ArtID=71136&SecID=365>

200Ikhwanonline. 2010. “Right to Work in Banks” (in Arabic). *Ikhwanonline*, 15 June. <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.aspx?ArtID=66535&SecID=365>

201Ikhwanonline. 2010. “Right to Postpone Pregnancy to Study” (in Arabic). *Ikhwanonline*. <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.aspx?ArtID=66262&SecID=365>

202Ikhwanonline. 2010. “Right not to Vote in Elections”, (in Arabic). *Ikhwanonline*, 26 May. <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.aspx?ArtID=65503&SecID=365>

203For an understanding of the concept of Jihad in Islamic law, see Bahlul (2003) and the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute (2007).

*Wahah al-Ussrah*²⁰⁴ (Family Oasis), does not even mention women. Yet a cursory glance to the topics covered shows that womanhood in fact constitutes the main subject, and that women are the readership which this section is intended for. Women, in other words, are seen as belonging to the reproductive sphere. The fact that this choice does not even need to be explained or clarified makes the naturalization of the heteronormative framework even more patent.

The *Family Oasis* section is divided into four groups respectively dealing with parenting²⁰⁵, house-keeping²⁰⁶, social affairs²⁰⁷ and family advice²⁰⁸. The content here may take various forms, from op-eds and editorials to simple announcements of events and political initiatives, to the usual reader's letter seeking a legal opinion from religious experts. The following quote, for example, is taken from an article about a conference on "family happiness" organized by the women office of the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP). The author reports the opinion of Amal Hamid, family expert and member of the "Happy Household" committee of the Muslim Brotherhood, who, while debating the issue of conjugal relationship, argued the following:

[T]he aim of family life is [the creation of] a stable household in the shadow of peacefulness and tranquillity, [...] the differences between partners reach integration for both of them complete each other. [...] [T]he lack of understanding between a wife and her husband and the equality [between them] is an external imposition of Western culture [...] the neglect of the family sphere is among the causes of differences and problems for families as well as individuals, for if the woman works, and her husband knows that she does not need him, then as a consequence there is a lack of obedience towards him and she neglects her house and its appearance.²⁰⁹

One does not need too much effort to unpack the inherently conservative and essentialist vision through which this statement frames gender relations. The reproductive sphere is entirely attached to the figure of the woman, whose only preoccupations are those related to the happiness of her husband and the appearance of their house. Her independence is regarded as a Western imposition leading to troubling consequences, and women's aspirations to work and be economically independent is said to produce a lack of "obedience" or respect with regard to her husband. Although the statement notes that genders are characterized by specific differences, and that they are complementary, men's duties are nowhere to be found whereas those of women are clearly listed.

The content grouped under this section follows the same editorial line, which becomes even

204 *Wahah al-Ussrah* (Family Oasis): <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Section.aspx?SecID=108>

205 See all items listed under the tag "Child's World" at: http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Archive.aspx?Sec_ID=320

206 See all items listed under the tag "Happy House" at: http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Archive.aspx?Sec_ID=321

207 See all items listed under the tag "Social Issues" at: http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Archive.aspx?Sec_ID=323

208 See all items listed under the tag "Family Advice" at: http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Archive.aspx?Sec_ID=325

209 Mahmoud, Mi. 2013. "Family Expert: Proximity to Allah achieves conjugal happiness" (in Arabic). *Ikhwanonline*, 11 February. <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.aspx?ArtID=138319&SecID=108>

more evident in the readers' letters. This is a recurrent format for Islamic websites, in general, and Ikhwanonline in particular. As noted before, here the content is provided by the reader, who writes to the website seeking a legal opinion from a religious authority. Readers writing in this section, seeking advice from experts, seems to be predominantly women. In one of such letters, a young woman asks how to deal with his father who prohibits her to wear the niqab until her marriage²¹⁰. Another woman, presumably from Saudi Arabia, seeks help after she discovered her husband watching porn movies²¹¹. Finally, yet another young woman is worried because her future husband, despite his devotion and piousness, is shorter than her and looks even shorter among other men.

He might have a shorter body, but he stands tall in his da'wah and his learning of the Qur'an [...] he might look shorter among other men, yet he also rises above them with his da'wah [...] you should not be brag about his physical height, yet you should be proud of his da'wah [...] for the weight of his body increases as his da'wah grows.²¹²

It would be possible to provide the reader with other similar examples, but it is hoped that the cases presented here are sufficient to offer a general picture of the website. To be sure, other sections and arguments could have been taken into consideration. Yet, as in the previous chapter, the aim was not so much to produce a comprehensive content analysis as to expose what I find to be the main features of these media outlets as well as their imagined audiences. While the website presented in chapter four aimed at reaching out western audiences, influencing their perceptions of the Muslim Brotherhood, such an urgency is nowhere to be found in the present case. Therefore, having described and examined Ikhwanonline, the following section will conclude the chapter by drawing a comparison between the former and Ikhwanweb, the English website of the Muslim Brotherhood.

A Comparison between Ikhwanweb and Ikhwanonline

In order to draw a comparison between the two official websites of the Muslim Brotherhood, it is necessary to briefly summarize the elements examined in the previous sections. To begin with, Ikhwanonline, the MB official website in Arabic, precedes its counterpart in English and came as a result of a five-year period in which members of the organization had been experimenting with the internet and digital technologies. From the late 1990s to 2003, ordinary members or small branches

210Ikhwanonline. 2012. "My Father Prohibits me to wear the Niqab" (in Arabic). *Ikhwanonline*, 27 December. <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.aspx?ArtID=133185&SecID=325>

211Ikhwanonline. 2012. "My Husband watches Porn Movies!" (in Arabic). *Ikhwanonline*, 29 December. <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.aspx?ArtID=133256&SecID=325>

212Ikhwanonline. 2012. "My Future Husband is shorter than me, how do I approach him?" (in Arabic). *Ikhwanonline*, 17 January. <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.aspx?ArtID=135416&SecID=325>

of the Muslim Brotherhood launched various websites. These media initiatives were often short-lived, since they were not sustained by the organization and were based on the voluntary efforts of their creators. Ikhwanonline was thus launched in 2003 to meet the grassroots demands for an official online presence of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Unfortunately, its database is not as accessible as that of Ikhwanweb and does not allow to fully retrieve and browse all its material. In this regard, the latter website, Ikhwanweb, seemed constructed on a much more functional architecture, for its content can be browsed and examined in a chronological order. It is important to underline the different dates of launch, for Ikhwanonline was established two years before the Muslim Brotherhood would win 88 seats in the 2005 parliamentary elections. These websites were launched in two different historical contexts and, to some extent, this aspect contributed to shape the outlook of Ikhwanweb in particular. Indeed, the MB official website in English is launched shortly before the 2005 elections and was precisely intended to engage with western policy-making circles and their perceptions of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Ikhwanonline, however, does not seem to share the same mission as Ikhwanweb. For even its outlook and aesthetics signal a precise choice in line with the political tradition of the Muslim Brotherhood as well as its adherence to Islamic ethos. A first, cursory look at the layout of the two websites is sufficient to conclude that they were designed to serve different purposes as well as audiences. Unlike Ikhwanweb, its counterpart in Arabic displays several aesthetic choices which clearly articulate its Islamic character. On Ikhwanonline the main colour used as a background for objects and sections is green²¹³, which is traditionally associated with Islam, whereas Ikhwanweb chooses to use other colours such as red, blue and grey. Along the same lines, the two websites use different methods to indicate time and dates. While the English website only adopts the Gregorian calendar and GMT, Ikhwanonline displays both calendars, Islamic and Gregorian, as well as both GMT and Mecca Time.

As far as aesthetic choices are concerned, one last thing should be noted, and that is the different ways in which the two websites have decided to deal with the logo of the Muslim Brotherhood. On the one hand, Ikhwanonline displays a banner placed on its main header, where the traditional logo of the organization is fully reproduced, including the image of two swords crossed under the Qur'an and its slogan. On the other hand, these elements are nowhere to be found on the English website. The main header of Ikhwanweb is rather minimalist in its outlook, with the name of the website placed next to a stylized image representing the world. The tagline under the

²¹³<http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Default.aspx>

title reads: “The Muslim Brotherhood's Official English web site”²¹⁴. But the iconic logo of the Muslim Brotherhood is absent from the main header and can only be occasionally spotted while browsing the content. In other words, while Ikhwanonline clearly articulates its 'authentic' Islamic character, Ikhwanweb seems instead to downplay this attachment to traditional aesthetics, and willing to construct its outlook according to contemporary aesthetic canons.

To be sure, the audiences the two websites intend to reach out are imagined in completely different ways. Ikhwanweb was founded by Khairat el-Shatir with the precise objective to engage an international readership, in general, and western policy-making circles in particular. As noted in the previous chapter, several statements stress the fact that, through an English website, the Muslim Brotherhood aimed at tackling the western representations of the movement, collect the knowledge produced by research agencies and specialized publications, and take a position within the major debates about political Islam and Islamist movements in the region. A clear indication of this greater concern with current affairs, and the position of the group in relation to them, is provided by the place assigned by Ikhwanweb to the history of the Muslim Brotherhood. After the revolution, the website was subjected to a major restyling and now features a thematic section -MB History and Literature²¹⁵- which was previously placed in a navigation bar under the main header with a different title (About MB). This section only lists 20 items, the most recent of which was uploaded in 2010²¹⁶. There is also another thematic section -indeed, an online library- focusing on the history of the movement. But such a library is not exclusively composed by publications of Ikhwan-related intellectual figures. As it is to be expected, the works of religious scholars such as al-Qaradawy are well represented, yet the list also contains references to western publications about political Islam, Daniel Pipes' included²¹⁷.

When it was launched, the editorial staff of the Arabic website clearly did not have such an audience in mind. Unlike its English counterpart, then, the history, tradition, and even community life of the Muslim Brotherhood are prominently featured in the pages of Ikhwanonline. So central is this theme that the reader is introduced to it right from the start. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, the first thematic section organizing the content consists of a portal serving as the main access point to the Muslim Brotherhood. Not only is the reader provided with news updates, statements and initiatives of political representatives, the section also opens a rather comprehensive window on the group's life. In fact, along with the weekly newsletter issued by the Supreme

214<http://www.ikhwanweb.com/>

215See all items tagged under “MB History and Literature” at: <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/articles.php?pid=87>

216Hamza, Khaled. 2010. “Ikhwanweb mourns the death of Moderate Islamic Scholar Dr. Fathi Osman”. *Ikhwanweb*, 20 September. <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=26453>

217Browse all the items collected in the MB online library at: <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/onlineLibrary.php>

Guide²¹⁸, one can find other news items mourning the passing of MB members²¹⁹ as well as profiles of intellectual and political leading figures²²⁰. This function is also performed through a drop-down menu listing all the websites related to the organization and maintained by small branches based in governorates and city districts. Here Ikhwanonline functions as the main nodal point in a topology of Ikhwan media outlets, representing the movement to itself even in its spatial, territorial configuration. It is thus clear that, rather than representing the Muslim Brotherhood to foreign audiences, this website serves the opposite function, that is representing the organization before its constituency.

The different imagined audiences have also had a profound impact on linguistic choices and editorial guidelines. Ikhwanweb consciously articulates a discursive break in relation to its traditional background, shifting from “missionary” to “political discourse” so as to constitute itself as the “group's Western mind-oriented platform”. Such a shift implied a different linguistic choice to report political events and current affairs from the region. In this regard, Khaled Hamza traced specific editorial guidelines to deal with the Iraq invasion and the Palestinian cause. To frame these events, the clash of civilization rhetoric is to be avoided, and terms such as “crusaders” and “enemies of Islam” are replaced with other expressions that do not frame these events as religious conflicts²²¹. This move translated into an intense engagement with “western” perceptions of the movement and the knowledge produced by research institutions and specialized newspapers and magazines. As noted in the previous chapter, while the website does publish original content in the form of editorials, official statements, press releases and op-eds, it also serves as a repository of reports and news items published by mainstream publications.

Such a discursive shift is nowhere to be found on the Arabic website, which does not even show the need to articulate or theorize any particular editorial guideline. Ikhwanonline keeps the bar straight on what Khaled Hamza would call the “missionary discourse” of the Muslim Brotherhood. The concept of *da'wah* plays a central role throughout the website, as its practice is assumed to be a major component of both the profiles of members and leaders of the organization as well as a guiding principle of Ikhwanonline. The work to spread the religious message of Islam represents one of the main traits highlighted while profiling the members of the *Maktab al-Irshad* (Guidance Office), whose missionary history is often celebrated together with trials and detentions as signs of commitment to the religious mission of the Muslim Brotherhood. Unlike its counterpart in English, in the Arabic website the concept of *da'wah* is assigned a specific thematic section entirely devoted

218See all the weekly newsletters at: http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Archive.aspx?Sec_ID=213

219See all the items listed under *Ikhwan Society* at: <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Section.aspx?SecID=105>

220See all the items listed under *Society's News* at: <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Section.aspx?SecID=101>

221Hamza, Khaled. 2009. “Muslim Brotherhood’s Media, from the Missionary to the Political discourse”. *Ikhwanweb*, 16 June. <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=20546>

to the provision of news updates, events, historical accounts and original texts focusing on the importance of infusing everyday life and political struggles with an Islamic ethos. To the figure of Hasan al-Banna, the founding father of the Muslim Brotherhood, the website dedicates an entire subgroup²²², while another section²²³ broadens the scope and examines the way in which his teachings and example has been taken up by historical and current intellectual and political figures of the movement. What is also worth being noted is that these collections are exclusively composed not only of resources in Arabic, but more specifically of the scholarship of Ikhwan members and intellectuals.

This is a rather different perspective from that articulated by Ikhwanweb. In this case, the constant work of surveying and confronting foreign perceptions led its editorial staff to opt for broader selection criteria. Thus, the collections of items focusing on the history of the movement comprehend both the scholarship of leading intellectual figures of the Muslim Brotherhood as well as the works of academics and think tanks. What is even more relevant for the present discussion is that Ikhwanweb devotes no space to the importance of missionary work. In fact, its editor in chief, Khaled Hamza, would clearly argue against such an agenda, stating that the mission of Ikhwanweb is not so much that of spreading a religious truth as to reveal the “political” message of the “moderate Muslim Brotherhood”²²⁴. And while being coherent with the objective of downplaying religious tones and rhetoric, this move creates a fundamental difference between Ikhwanweb and its counterpart in Arabic, for the latter does precisely the opposite.

Such a divergent approach to the centrality of religious ethos is further revealed by the way in which the two websites treat issues related to gender and sexuality. In the Arabic website, the subject is assigned a thematic section which explicitly place it in the exclusive domain of family life. While both websites do not take into account the existence of different sexual orientations, in the case of Ikhwanonline the heteronormative framework is articulated and legitimized by religious authority. The “Family Oasis” section²²⁵ does not even mention women, for they are implicitly assigned to the reproductive sphere. Furthermore, while several items report about conferences, seminars and lectures about family life, what crucially contributes to render the religious tone even more evident is the usage of a characteristic genre of Islamic websites.

I am here referring to the readers' letters seeking legal advice from religious scholars. Such a format is usually employed by religious websites where scholars or experts in Islamic law reply to

222See all the items listed under “Al-Banna and the Ikhwan” at: <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Section.aspx?SecID=111>

223See all the items listed under “Advocates' Garden/School” at: <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Section.aspx?SecID=110>

224Hamza, Khaled. 2009. *Ibidem*.

225See all the items listed under “Family Oasis” at: <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Section.aspx?SecID=108>

readers' messages asking questions about their daily lives. These questions usually revolves around aspects of sexuality but can also pose different types of ethical problems. Needless to say, the answers are provided by religious scholars, often affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, who will frame both the problem and its solution in religious terms. Such a feature is completely absent from Ikhwanweb, whose stance on the subject appears to be slightly more nuanced. Like the Arabic website, Ikhwanweb also features a thematic section on gender. In this case, however, the subject is no longer the family but women, and the issues being covered relate to political and civil rights²²⁶.

By Way of Conclusion: Da'awy vs. siyyasi

It would be easy to deploy a familiar Orientalist trope and explain these differences resorting to the proverbial 'duplicitous nature' of the 'Arab', who says something in his/her language and something else in English. To be sure, these diverging approaches do exist and determine both the outlook and agenda of these two websites. Yet it is not my intention to question or speculate over the sincerity of the Muslim Brotherhood and their words. In my view, it is rather more productive to take them at face value and assume their genuine commitment to both positions. Rather than the result of a conscious duplicitous strategy, I would argue that Ikhwanonline and Ikhwanweb represent two conflicting visions that coexist within the Muslim Brotherhood. They are identified by Khaled Hamza, editor of the English website, while formulating his shift from “missionary” to “political” discourse. If one had to render these two terms in Arabic, s/he would translate them respectively with *da'awy* and *siyyasi*.

These words refer to two poles between which the ideological outlook of the Muslim Brotherhood oscillates. While the former argues for the missionary work of spreading the religious truth, the latter aims instead to embed the religious ethos within secular institutions or, even better, redesign them according to Islamic principles. Rather than being a new phenomenon, this is in fact a well-known tension of political Islam. The question would be hotly debated between the 1980s and the 1990s, when Islamist movements in general were considering to continue along traditional lines or engage more decidedly with party politics. Scholars such as Meijer have already noted this constitutive ambivalence of Islamist movements referring to the political term as *hizbiyyah* (see Meijer 1997; 2009: 26-28). It is under this framework, then, that the differences between Ikhwanweb and Ikhwaonline must be examined. For it is precisely this tension between a religious and conservative current and a more secularizing, mildly reformist trend which generates these diverging approaches to politics. Such a constitutive ambivalence will also contribute to the

²²⁶See all the items listed under “Women” at: <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/articles.php?pid=10116>

augmented visibility of young MB bloggers who, to some extent, resorted to blogging precisely to take a position on this subject. However, just like the official websites, the results will not be free of contradictions and unintended consequences. The last chapter, then, is devoted to unpack some of these dynamics.

Chapter 6

MB Bloggers: Blogging as both a Hegemonic and Resistance Tool

The present chapter proceeds along the lines traced with the analysis of Ikhwanweb. However, while continuing to trace power relations, here the object of study is much more elusive. What follows is an attempt to analyze the political significance of the Islamist blogosphere. The term 'blogosphere' is often employed to indicate the sum total of weblogs published in a given country for example – say Egypt, Italy or UK. In the case of Islamist bloggers, however, the defining criterion is provided by the fact that they are members, militants or sympathizers of the Muslim Brotherhood. But to refer to such a realm as a bounded and, even worse, homogeneous space is misleading. What one might call the *Ikhwanosphere* consists of a loose and often ephemeral collection of weblogs, small websites, forums and wikis affiliated or ideologically close to the Muslim Brotherhood.

In no way does the term Islamist refer or imply a homogeneity in terms of identity, beliefs, values or tastes. To begin with, to look for clear affiliation to an organization that formally does not exist seems a rather paradoxical exercise. Indeed, the uncertainty of such a boundary was both a problematic node and a political threat, a display of authority and a weapon of resistance. Following the impressive use of blogging during the mobilizational apex of the Kefaya movement, many young Brothers, and Sisters, began using weblogs as tools for political communication. They also intended to address the popular perception of the movement, “the human side of the Brotherhood” as one of them has put it (see Lynch 2007). There is no doubt that many initiatives positively contributed to such a goal. Yet, in doing so, these bloggers also initiated a process of fragmentation, a centrifugal movement that would fully unfold after the revolution, although early signs were visible well before the fall of Mubarak.

To analyze this complex scenario I will first start by situating the growth of blogging in its historical context and illustrating the appropriation of practices such as citizen journalism by Egyptian bloggers. The last two sections sketch the contours of this Islamist topology, focusing on the ways in which blogging and new media served as sites where the political ideology of the Ikhwan was developed and reproduced, as well as accommodated and fiercely contested. If one is looking for a blogging-driven revolution I guess this is the wrong place. At work here are imperceptible movements, which however point to seismic shifts within the representational mechanisms of the organization.

Blogging: Early Developments and the emergence of an Islamist blogosphere

The term weblog refers to what might otherwise be called an online diary, a journal. Its basic units, the so-called blogposts, can contain short writings, pictures and images, videos or links. Blogposts are normally published and accessible in a reverse chronological order, so that the reader first accesses the most recent ones and, if interested, continues to read previous posts. The term weblog refers precisely to this feature of keeping an online log; its usage became common between 1997 and 1999, when media practitioners such as John Barger and Peter Merholz started playing with the word. Following this early experimental stage, many IT experts started exploring the potential of this new medium. In 1999, Evan Williams and Meg Hourihan founded Pyra Labs and began developing a weblog platform available for free on the internet. In 2003 both Pyra Labs and its creature Blogger -which in the meantime had developed revenue-based versions like Blogspot and Blogger pro- were noticed and acquired by the web 2.0 giant Google (Blood 2004).

Thus begins the explosion of the blogosphere: from a virtual niche for geeks to a mass phenomenon in less than two years. In 2005 Technorati, one of the main search engines focusing on blogging and social media, was already crunching the big numbers of such exponential growth of weblogs and blogging platforms: a new blog every second, 80,000 new blogs each day and a sum total of 14.2 million weblogs in March 2005 (Sifry 2005). At the time of writing, September 2012, Technorati directory includes 1,310,389 of weblogs²²⁷. To the vast majority of media practitioners and entrepreneurs, the diffusion of blogging platforms could only point to a change of a revolutionary sort. While reviewing a book advancing such argument (Kline *et al.* 2005), a journalist of the *American Journalism Review* would comment as follows:

Seldom if ever has a media innovation exploded any faster. The authors' use of the word "revolution" seems totally justified. And what is most interesting, and probably important, may not be the blog revolution itself, but what it says and foreshadows about changes in our overall media, culture and society. [...] Blogs could create what BusinessWeek called "media of the masses," a force field of "citizen publishing" by "stand-alone journalists" and "networks of dedicated amateurs" who can break "the monopoly of the mainstream media."

(Stepp 2006)

Since then, media experts and pundits have never stopped discussing whether that of blogging was an actual revolution and, if so, what kind of revolution it was. Many kept rehearsing this rhetoric and praising the changes blogging would bring to business, corporate media and culture by and large, focusing on their role as platforms enabling a new class of journalists to emerge.

²²⁷Technorati, directory: <http://technorati.com/blogs/directory/> (last accessed 09/09/12).

BusinessWeek would call them “stand-alone journalists” or “dedicated amateurs”, but the more fortunate expression would become citizen journalism, identified by many as either the ultimate panacea to all western democracies' weaknesses (Barlow 2007; Drezner and Farrell 2004; Farrell 2008; Gillmor 2004; Goode 2009; Sullivan 2002) or the last nail in their coffins (Keen 2007).

Other scholars, however, were trying to approach the subject matter from a rather cautious point of view, in many cases building their accounts with theoretical concepts. Geert Lovink has tried to revive the German traditions of critical theory and media studies, and elaborated on it a critical theory of cyberculture (2007: ch. 1, 3). Likewise, combining Lacanian psychoanalysis and Deleuze's theory of affect, the US political theorist Jodi Dean has recently launched an attack against Habermasian conceptualizations of the cyberspace and argued instead for describing the blogosphere as affective networks (2010). The application of critical perspectives to the study of weblogs and network culture has generated more complex analytical approaches, conceiving blogging as a practice and weblogs as artifacts whose analysis should include all their aesthetic components. In this respect, Rettberg provides a useful definition, as it runs along the theoretical and methodological lines outlined in previous chapters:

[B]logging is a cumulative process, most posts presuppose some knowledge of the history of the blog, and they fit into a larger history. There's a very different sense of rhythm and continuity when you follow a blog, or a group of blogs, over time, compared to simply reading a single post. [...] A blog [...] cannot be read simply for its writing, but will always be seen as the sum of writing, layout, connections and links, and tempo.

(Rettberg 2008: 4)

While literary approaches might concentrate their attention exclusively to the basic unit of a given weblog, the blogpost, an account more informed by sociological and political considerations should not only include the analysis of the whole artifact -focusing on links being displayed or peculiar aesthetic choices, for example- but also try to reconstruct its history, so to speak, capable to locate and analyze it within its historical context. Examining the thriving blogging scene established in Iran, Sreberny and Khiabany opted for the Gramscian category of intellectual work. In *Blogistan*, they first note the persistence of cultural essentialist perspectives according exclusive primacy to Islamic and religious bloggers, and the move on to discuss the vast plethora of weblogs maintained by academics and students, trade unions and leftist groups (2008: ch. 5). Avoiding the usual Habermasian frame, the authors follow instead Mouffe and conceive of the Iranian blogosphere as an agonistic realm constituted by previously marginalized subjects who now speak for themselves, the spaces they manage to occupy and the range of topics they succeed in diffusing throughout

society (*ibid*: 132).

I would further elaborate on this notion of intellectual labour but taking it to a different direction. Following the analytical framework elaborated within autonomist Marxism, Tiziana Terranova has formulated a materialist reading of contemporary cyberculture. Moving beyond the “glamorization of digital labor”, she sets out to explore the connections between “digital economy” and the “social factory” (2000: 33). The latter term has been discussed in chapter one, and refers to the process by which, according to Italian autonomist marxist, capital now exceeds the factory and deploys, in a pervasive and capillary way, mechanisms of capture and valorization throughout the entire fabric of society.

To further clarify, one should refer for a moment to Sreberny and Khiabany's schematic definitions of intellectual labor. Elaborating on Garnham, they differentiate between “embedded intellectuals”, information workers and representatives of emancipatory politics (2009: 134). It could be said that, while Sreberny and Khiabany focus more on the latter, in Terranova's work the perspective appears to be more concentrated on information workers. Yet in the latter's treatment of labor there is a significant difference, which enables Terranova to move beyond mere economicistic concerns and open up the space for a viable materialist critique of cyberculture. Indeed, contrary to textualist views on the cyberspace, she regards it as the infrastructure materializing the continuous valorization process of capital, whose main source is not meaning but rather what she calls “free labour”:

[s]imultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited, free labor on the Net includes the activity of building sites, modifying software packages, reading and participating in mailing lists, and building virtual spaces on MUDs and MOOs. Far from being an "unreal," empty space, the Internet is animated by cultural and technical labor through and through, a continuous production of value that is completely immanent to the flows of the network society at large.

(Terranova 2000: 33-34)

Thus conceived, the concept of free labour enables to grasp a variety of practices, knowledge and abilities that are different from the Gramscian coordinates. One could say that the concept of free labor refers to a paradoxical actualization of Gramsci's views of intellectual work, whereby the pervasive mode of production now expects from its subjects to serve precisely “the function of intellectuals” (Gramsci 1988: 9). Echoing Virno's reflections on the performative nature of contemporary labor (2004: 49-71), Terranova regards free labor as challenging the division between “production and consumption, work and cultural expression”, while at the same time noting that they are reconfigured according to a different, rather than new, “logic of value” (2004:

75). In the digital economy, value is created through a continuous, experimental process of valorization of knowledge, culture and affects (Terranova 2000: 38).

This analytical toolbox seems more adequate than the representational function assigned to intellectuals within Gramscian hegemonic politics. To begin with, as I already hinted at, it opens up the space for a materialist critique of cyberculture. More to the point, however, the concept of free labor is extremely helpful once employed to describe the emergence and development of an Islamist blogosphere in Egypt. The impressive engagement of the Ikhwan with digital technologies has been acknowledged by many scholars. However, while some tend to be even sympathetic (Lynch 2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2007d, 2007e; Tufekci 2012), other accounts reveal a sense of anxiety over their hegemonic practices. Once it comes to define the ideological work performed online by militants and ordinary members of the Ikhwan, they are deprived of any agency and characterized instead as “e-militias” (Herrera and Lotfy 2012) or subservient propagandists (Morozov 2010).

In chapter two, I already exposed the pitfalls of such theoretical and methodological presuppositions. It is highly reductive to frame the work and militancy of ordinary members as the blind repetition of rules and directions imposed from higher organizational levels. While this dimension must be included in the analysis, it however cannot obscure other kinds of relations. Islamist digital activism is to be conceived not as the work of militants endowed with false consciousness, but as the result of antagonistic relations whose outcomes and effects are more often than not ambivalent and contradictory.

The existence of a thriving blogging scene developed and maintained by Islamist bloggers started gaining the attention of media practitioners and political analysts after the Brothers' stunning political achievement in the 2005 parliamentary elections. With 88 members being elected as independent candidates, the Brotherhood won 20% of the parliamentary seats and thus officially became the largest political opposition group sitting in People's Assembly. Much is yet to be written about this historical political victory. Indeed, some scholars and commentators have either hinted at the existence of a political deal between the Ikhwan and the NDP (see Ashour 2009), or to a manoeuvre of the ruling party that literally fashioned its own domestic political threat in order to maintain power. The latter line of argument was suggested by Issandr el Amrani. Reflecting upon the upcoming 2010 parliamentary elections -which would be heavily controlled by the regime, later resulting in all political forces, Brothers included, to abandon the electoral competition- el Amrani revised the electoral performance of the MB in 2005:

There's a rhythm to the People's Assembly elections in Egypt [...] that traditionally starts by throwing a bunch of Muslim Brothers in jail the month beforehand. Usually this never involves their candidates, but rather the candidates' campaign organizers and supporters.

The idea is to cripple their ability to run a proper electoral machine. I am reminded of going to see a senior Brotherhood figure on the eve of the 2005 elections, who told me: "For the first time in my life, there is not a single Brother in jail before an election." [...] I hope this makes clear once and for all the reason the MB performed well in 2005, grabbing 20% of seats for the first time: because it was allowed to. I don't think there can be any argument anymore that the Mubarak regime deliberately allowed, if not encouraged, the Brothers to do well in order to drive home the point to the Bush administration (and domestic audiences) that it's either them or the Islamists. There's no need to do that anymore, since there isn't any substantial pressure from Washington. Time to put the Brothers back in their box for the regime.

(El Amrani 2010)

While these considerations may certainly have some grain of truth, on the other hand it is just as undisputable that the Ikhwan had developed a real base of support on the ground. The new course of political activism outlined since the 1970s (see chapter three) will continue to bear its fruits under Mubarak. As El Amrani himself recognizes, during the 2005 electoral campaign the regime heavily cracked down on activists and militants campaigning for the independent candidates of the Muslim Brotherhood. Universities and students' associations were crucial spaces for the Brotherhood to mobilize their constituents and constantly acquire positions of power (al-Anani 2009).

That the political activism of Ikhwan was more than a perceived threat would become crystal clear one year after the elections. In fact, so vocal was the activism of young Islamists that their own organization seemed to be threatened by it. However paradoxical this might seem, if one follows the recent political trajectory of this movement the list of similar occurrences would grow exponentially. It seems as if the Muslim Brotherhood were driven by two conflicting forces, each pushing towards opposite directions. What is usually referred to as the 'Al-Azhar incident' is one of such moments. On December 10th 2006, what might pass as a minor student protest provided the regime with the opportunity for yet another round of repression against the Brothers. Shortly before the incident, the Free Student Union, a student union formed in November 2005 and consisting mostly of Ikhwan young members, had its candidates beaten and some of their names removed from the electoral lists, de facto preventing the union from taking part to the electoral competition (Islamic Human Rights Commission 2007). To counteract these repressive measures some 150 students at al-Azhar, members of the Free Student Union, organized a protest in the courtyard of the university. Shortly after the protest the police would round up 140 students and detain a number of prominent Ikhwan leaders, included the powerful second deputy of the Chairman, Khayrat el-Shater. Here is how the incident has been reported by *Human Rights Watch*:

The arrests follow a demonstration by the Free Student Union, a group comprised mostly of students affiliated with the Brotherhood formed in November 2005 to protest alleged government interference in student union elections. On December 10, the students held a

sit-in at an apartment building where they have been living since al-Azhar administrators expelled them from dormitories for their political activities. Roughly 35 of them, who wore balaclavas with “samidun” (“the steadfast”) written across them, gave a brief martial arts demonstration and performed military-style exercises. On December 14, police surrounded the dormitory and arrested at least 140 students there, although it is not clear if all participated in the demonstration. Police have not released the names of the detained students.

(*Human Rights Watch* 2006)

After this incident the police began investigating it further and the spectre of ban became tactile once again. As reported by Khalil Al Anani, the regime took advantage of this situation and heavily cracked down on the movement. Not only were hundred of leading and ordinary members charged with “belonging to an illegal organization”, rounded up and detained. The regime referred some of them to military tribunals, accusing them of having formed “paramilitary militias” while Mubarak himself depicted the group as “a threat to Egypt's security” (Al Anani 2007). For their part, the leadership of the movement distanced itself from the event, reaffirming its peaceful and reformist political agenda and “punishing” the protesters, who would eventually issue a public statement apologizing for the event (*Human Rights Watch* 2006; see also El Sirgany 2006; Shehata and Stacher 2007). In order to examine the emergence of an Ikhwan-related blogosphere, and the role blogging played in the organization, then, it is necessary to start from this event and assess its outcomes and developments.

Memory work and Advocacy Blogging: MB Youth and Human Rights

The 'Al-Azhar militias' case represented an important stage for the emergence of a proactive Islamist blogosphere. The repressive measures of both the security apparatus and higher cadres of the organization did not halt this process. In fact, one could say that such an event triggered the opposite effect. For young MB members turned to blogging and started using weblogs as tools for political communication, while at the same time building connections between similar attempts or campaigns sharing the same objectives. On 21 February 2007 Adel Moneim Mahmoud, a young member of the Muslim Brotherhood, decided to give publicity to an emerging networks of Islamist blogs campaigning on behalf of the detainees:

The fierce security campaign that the Egyptian regime is launching against the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) group and transferring 40 MB leaders to military tribunals in addition to arresting hundreds of intermediate leaders on fabricated cases, all these actions spurred a big number of Internet activists to fight such an unfair campaign and expose the exercises of the tyrant military rule towards the life of the Egyptians.²²⁸

228Mahmoud, Abdel Mon'em. 2007. “Blogs Against Military Rulers.” *Monem Press*. <http://monem->

The loose coalition of bloggers, which Moneim referred to as “Blogs against Military Rulers”, represented a small topology of Islamist blogs maintained by detainees' relatives and/or sympathizers: *Ensa*²²⁹, *El-Fagreya*²³⁰, *Khayrat al Shater's Sons*²³¹, *Banaat el-Erian*²³², *Free Beshr*²³³. These weblogs often consists of a collection of links and news updates about the detention and trials of members of the Muslim Brotherhood. The majority of them were launched and maintained by the sons and daughters of MB detainees. *Banaat el-Erian* (El-Erian's Daughters), for example, was set up and updated by Essam el-Erian's daughter, who used her weblogs to campaign for the release of his father. Likewise, the weblog *El-Fagreya* was launched by Asmaa, daughter of Yasser Abdou, another member of the Muslim Brotherhood deferred to a military court. *Free Beshr* is another weblog launched by Hani Mohamed Beshr to campaign for the release of his father, Mohamed Ali Beshr.

It is important to note that one of the main objectives of these weblogs was building an online solidarity network. *Free Beshr*, for example, invited its readers to show support through a banner that could be copied and displayed on other webpages²³⁴. These banners are often placed on the sidebars of personal weblogs, as an expression of solidarity with the cause. *Fagreya*²³⁵, in this respect, is a good case in point. One might regard these weblogs as self-centred endeavours, yet this is never the case. Despite the fact that the main subject was her father's detention, Asmaa's weblog displays a sidebar full of banners in solidarity of several other members. Rather than being constituted as individual efforts, these campaigns were consciously articulated according to a cooperative logic, where similar weblogs support each other.

This logic will be fully deployed by the author of *Ensa* (Forget), a weblog that became an information clearinghouse about arrests, detentions and trials of members of the Muslim Brotherhood. Ahmed Abdul Hafez launched the blog to protest against citizens' unlawful detentions and deferrals to military courts. Here, the word 'forget' was conceived as a threatening promise to the regime:

press.blogspot.com/2007/02/blogs-against-military-rulers.html.

229<http://ensaa.blogspot.co.uk/>

230<http://elfagreya.blogspot.co.uk/>

231<http://web.archive.org/web/20070922075050/http://www.khirat-elshater.blogspot.com/> (last accessed via *Internet Archive* on 10/09/12).

232<http://banatelerian.blogspot.co.uk/>

233<http://web.archive.org/web/20070922075050/http://www.freebeshr.com/> (last accessed via *Internet Archive* on 10/09/12).

234<http://web.archive.org/web/20080611083414/http://www.freebeshr.com/actNowAr.html> (last accessed via *Internet Archive* on 10/03/13).

235<http://elfagreya.blogspot.co.uk/>

Hosny Mubarak brought us back to square one, [he brought us] back to military tribunals ... don't worry, Mr. President, listen what I am going to tell you ... Forget it. This blog is concerned with one thing only ... [it] is concerned with a bankrupt regime, a regime that only looks after its own interests. The economy of our country goes to hell ... Businesses close down [...] university and research are at a standstill [...] you won't beat us to death ... and you won't tire our nerves for we don't see only our [parliamentary] seat!²³⁶

What enabled this weblog to gain a certain readership was not simply the fact that it acted as an access point to similar media outlets. On the main header, the author set up two horizontal navigation bars to display the links of other MB-related weblogs such as the above-mentioned *Khayrat al Shater's Sons*, *El-Fagreya* and *Free Beshr*. The blogger also encouraged his readership to actively contribute to the weblog, sending via email resources and news about the detainees:

Khayrat el-Shater and Mohammed Ali Beshr [...] were deferred to a military tribunal for the second time ... Hassan Malek is an excellent businessman ... why was he deferred to a military court?? [...] Those who have information or pictures or memories of these noble figures can send them to me via this blog so that it can serve as a reference point to all those who want to know their noble compatriots...²³⁷

These are but few examples showing how an Islamist blogosphere came to emerge. It is important to remark once again that in these cases the main drive behind the decision of opening a blog is provided by real-life events, more often than not traumatic events. No Habermasian model would be able to consider the pain and suffering inflicted by them; their only reason of existence is an urge to speak the truth to power, to ask for justice and freedom. Also, such a purpose is articulated through a practice, blogging, which at first sight appears to be a hotch-potch collage of press releases and updates²³⁸, music videos and poetry²³⁹, memories and pictures²⁴⁰, badges of previous and upcoming protest initiatives, links to other blogs, campaigns and issues.

There is nothing to be discussed here, but rather an injustice to be staunchly and continuously denounced, accompanied by a demand to put an end to such an injustice. The practice of blogging here becomes almost literally a mnemonic practice, a work of keeping the memory of both the

236Abdul Hafez, Ahmed. 2007. "First Word" (in Arabic). *Ensa*, 12 February. Retrieved from Internet Archive at: <http://web.archive.org/web/20120912193305/http://ensaa.blogspot.com/2007/02/blog-post.html>

237Abdul Hafez, Ahmed. 2007. "Help Egypt and its Nation Dream ..." (in Arabic). *Ensa*, 12 February. Retrieved from Internet Archive at: http://web.archive.org/web/20070712083716/http://ensaa.blogspot.com/2007/02/blog-post_8846.html

238See for example Abdul Hafez, Ahmed. 2008. "Today marks the Third Year of Reformist Members' Absence" (in Arabic). *Ensa*, December 2008. http://ensaa.blogspot.co.uk/2008/12/blog-post_15.html

239The weblog campaigning for the release of Khayrat el Shater has published more than one post on poetry, and it created a specific label containing all of them. See <http://web.archive.org/web/20070613180327/http://khirat-elshater.blogspot.com/search/label/%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B1> (last accessed via *Internet Archive* on 10/09/12).

240See for example Khayrat el Shater's Sons. 2007. "My memories with My Father during Exams" (in Arabic). *Khairat el-Shater's sons*, June. Retrieved from Internet Archive at: http://web.archive.org/web/20070613180327/http://khirat-elshater.blogspot.com/2007/06/blog-post_10.html

injustice and the pain it has caused. This urge to remember and tell one's own story emerges powerfully as the main reason driving Moneim Mahmoud to open a blog. This young member of the Ikhwan was arrested, detained and tortured several times. Although the charges were those routinely reserved for the Ikhwan, belonging to an illegal organization, his arrests were always associated with protest events and activism²⁴¹. Like the previous ones, the 2007 detention was caused by a frontal attack he decided to move against the regime. Having witnessed the harsh repression following the al-Azhar incidents, Moneim decided to write about torture and published a memory of his first detention, something he kept secret for four years²⁴². In light of recent events, it is quite interesting to read the closing line of his confession:

Torture hasn't been confined to political prisoners only, to but suspects in criminal cases who were tortured at police stations. [...] [T]orture in Egypt is a continuous policy and a method of a regime. We should expose them and publish the news of tortures everywhere. I have a suggestion: that we show the torture cases to the Interior Ministry and the regime on 25 January, the Police Day, a day that honours all Egyptians, not only policemen. But the state security gangs of Habib Al-Adli co-opt that day and appropriates it to themselves and the country honours them although they are criminals. Let's expose their true criminal nature on this day and call it "*the Day of The Black Soldier*", and post on our web sites and weblogs the crimes committed by the Interior Ministry and its officers. Let's stage a vigil against the black soldier on 25 January.²⁴³

However, Moneim's 2007 arrest and detention was always related to his activism, but this time a rather different of motivation was given by authorities. It is important to note that bloggers are well aware of the fact they are not target as *bloggers*, but as *activists*. In one interview, it is Moneim himself that specifies that "authorities do not persecute bloggers but rather the activists among them" (Ben Gharbia 2007). What kind of activism was he practicing to get arrested in 2007? As his lawyer stated, Monem was arrested for blogging about torture, and related violations of human rights, while also building connections with human rights groups and associations (Abbadi 2007).

To squeeze such dramatic experiences into western bourgeois parlance such as 'citizen journalism', or 'civic engagement', is an act of epistemological violence I refuse to make. What one

241Moneim's biography can be read at this website created in occasion of his last arrest in 2007. To show solidarity and campaign for his release, several prominent bloggers and activists built this website. It is important to note that these bloggers were based both in and outside Egypt, and were ideologically distant from Moneim's islamist views. Alaa abdel Fattah and Malek X, for example, are renowned activists in the Egyptian left. The website has now been taken down, but the abovementioned webpage is accessible via *Internet Archive* here (last accessed via *Internet Archive* on 10/09/12): <http://web.archive.org/web/20071029043407/http://freemonem.cybversion.org/about/>

242Mahmoud, Abdel Mon'em. 2007. "The Fourth Anniversary of the Torture of Detainee #25." *Monem Press*, 3 May. Retrieved from Internet Archive at: <http://web.archive.org/web/20071009075711/http://freemonem.cybversion.org/2007/05/03/the-fourth-anniversary-of-the-torture-of-detainee-25/>

243Mahmoud, Abdel Mon'em. 2007. *Ibidem*.

is confronted with here is in fact something far deeper than any newsreport. This is an act of witnessing and remembrance, an exercise which Foucault would call *parrhesia*: “the courage to speak the truth in spite of some danger” (2001: 15-16). The truth these blogs were screaming out loud is the memory of pain, suffering, violence, trauma and loss, which they consign to the only archive available to housing and making them known, public. One is often led to think of torture mainly in physical terms, for it actually work upon the victim's body. But this is somewhat misleading, for a key dimension of torture is that one keeps the memory of it. As Mitchell has noted, the fear of violence is a constitutive component of torture, for “[m]emory and anticipation are not something ancillary to the working of so-called direct repression but part of its every operation” (1990: 559). But if fear is the promise of violence, the memory of it can be turned into a promise of truth and justice (or 'evidence' and 'responsibility'). By consigning his memory of violence to an archive, Moneim turns it from a repository of fear to a political weapon. By denouncing the amnesia of its violence, he exposes as arbitrary fiction the state's monopoly of truth. Unlike many before him, Moneim did not hide his sympathies for the Brothers. In fact, as he himself recalls it, this choice was largely met with approval by younger Brothers and Sisters (Ben Gharbia 2007).

In the following years, the Egyptian cyberspace would not only witness the mushrooming of Islamist bloggers, but also a process of diversification of media initiatives. From small to official websites, from weblogs to profiles on multimedia sharing platforms such as Youtube, Twitter and Facebook, wikis and semi-official webzines specialized in serving different purposes. The experience and mission of Ikhwanweb, that of tackling “western” perceptions of the Muslim Brotherhood, was further developed through the establishment of other media outlets such as Ikhwanscope²⁴⁴ and Ikhwanophobia²⁴⁵. To some extent, these two websites follow the line traced with the launch of the MB official website in English, yet they each specialized in the coverage of two distinct threads. The constant work of surveying the cyberspace and collect anything related to the Muslim Brotherhood remains, but the missions of these websites are profoundly different. Ikhwanscope serves as a repository of knowledge about Islamist movements in the world, thus gathering research papers and news items not necessarily focused on the Muslim Brotherhood but more generally concerned with issues relevant for the study and comprehension of political Islam:

Ikhwanscope is an independent Muslim Progressive and moderate non-profit site, concentrating mainly on the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood Movement founded by the Imam Hassan Albana [sic]. Ikhwanscope is concerned with all articles published

244<http://www.ikhwanscope.net/>

245<http://ikhwanophobia.com/>

relating to any movements which follow the school of thought of the Muslim Brotherhood worldwide. [...] Ikhwanscope is directed towards helping researchers and Islamic and political scholars with references concerning Islamic Movements.²⁴⁶

This website, however, is no longer regularly updated -for the most recent item was uploaded in late 2010²⁴⁷. The authors have also established online presences on Facebook²⁴⁸ and Twitter²⁴⁹. The profile on Facebook counts more than 500 subscribers while their Twitter account has attracted nearly 2,000 followers. Yet both profiles followed the trajectory of the website, as they stopped being updated in late 2010. The other website developed out of the experience of Ikhwanweb was Ikhwanophobia, though it seems that this website too was rather short-lived. Ikhwanophobia was launched in early 2010 and, as the name implies, it aimed at exposing and refuting Islamophobic arguments about Islam in general, and the Muslim Brotherhood in particular:

Ikhwanophobia is a new term meaning the fear and or hatred of the Muslim Brotherhood members and their ideologies. [...] Ikhwanophobes are the factions who call for discrimination towards Muslim Brotherhood members and Muslims in general. They may be characterized by having the belief that all or most MB's are religious fanatics, with violent tendencies towards non-Muslims, and reject as directly opposed to Islam such concepts as equality, tolerance, and democracy. [...] Ikhwanophobia is completely linked to the Islamophobia term, where there are continued accusations of the Muslim societies and Islamic Centers in Europe or in the States of being affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood. [...] We at Ikhwanophobia.com are determined to shed light on the accusations and allegations against the MB illustrating to the world the true face of moderate Islamists.²⁵⁰

To be sure, a number of these media projects were the result of a conscious and strategic engagement with new technologies. But this is only one aspect of the picture. It would be a mistake to overlook the fact that advocacy blogs campaigning against torture did represent a strategic gain for the Brothers, who could once again show their commitment to human rights. Like many other similar cases, Ikhwanweb closely followed Moneim's juridical ordeal and took part to political initiatives in his support²⁵¹. Khaled Hamza, Ikhwanweb editor in chief, is credited for having encouraged young MB activists to launch their own weblogs (see Hill 2010; Abbadi 2007). In the founding editorial statement of Ikhwanweb, while reviewing the media initiatives established by the Muslim Brotherhood, he positively notes the emergence of MB bloggers, regarding their online

246<http://www.ikhwanscope.net/about/>

247<http://www.ikhwanscope.net/2010/09/26/the-arab-tomorrow/>

248<https://www.facebook.com/ikhwanscope>

249<https://twitter.com/ikhwanscope>

250<http://ikhwanophobia.com/about/>

251The following link provides access to all the webpages categorized under with the tag "Abdel Monem Mahmoud":
<http://www.ikhwanweb.com/tagBView.php?id=Abdel%20Monem%20Mahmoud>

activism as a sign of openness and modernization for the Muslim Brotherhood:

The Muslim Brotherhood's media experience still go on as Muslim Brotherhood Youth are still interacting with new media channels and dynamics of Western modernism. The weblogs have been a space for individual self-expression and a chance to discover talents and skills of the Muslim Brotherhood youth. It has been a rich experience that added so much to the group²⁵²

But it would be equally misleading to regard the rise of an Islamist blogosphere simply as the result of a coordinated strategy enacted by ideologically blind militants. Most of these weblogs were in fact the result of uncoordinated individual efforts, often performed without the official support of the organization. MB bloggers framed their digital activism as an individual effort, which had to be carried out according to the principles of the Muslim Brotherhood. Asmaa el-Erian, for example, notes a kind of ambivalent relationship between blogging and being part of a political movement. For blogging, in her views, is first of all a practice of personal expression:

Sometimes blogs are shown organizationally, but in fact there is no kind of communication between blogs and the working in the MB, as this is contrary to the nature of blogging, since by doing that blogging may turn to an entirely intellectual or political work, and it will lose its meaning as a good ground for personal expression.²⁵³

Neither a business model nor a well-defined engagement with citizen journalism, but only the labor of cultivating relationships and political affects with like-minded people was the main drive behind the emergence of an Islamist blogging scene. And yet, the very same practice of self-expression, enthusiastically embraced by both Khaled Hamza and Asmaa el-Erian among others, was met with scepticism by the organization. Senior figures seemed more concerned about the unintended consequences of this phenomenon. “The bloggers have to be guided”, said 50-year old Brotherhood member Ali Abdul Fattah, “we don't want them to portray disunity” (in Williams 2008). As it turned out, he was right to be concerned. For as soon as the MB youth started blogging, they constituted a site where the representational mechanisms of the organization could be eluded, piercing the ideological veil of unity and cohesion.

Blogging as a Tool of Resistance

The preceding section sketched the emergence of a thriving mediascape established by young MB

252Hamza, Khaled. 2009. “Muslim Brotherhood’s Media, from the Missionary to the Political Discourse.” *IkhwanWeb*. June 16. <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=20546>

253Islamonline. 2008. “Brotherhood Blogs: Windows To Revelation, Criticism And Organizational Rise.” *IkhwanWeb*. September 20. <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?ID=17948&SectionID=0>.

bloggers. The mushrooming of media initiatives attracted the interest of journalists, political analysts and commentators. Indeed, the early experiments with blogging prompted a viral process of emulation, with many young members following the examples previously discussed. To explain this phenomenon political analysts have stressed the generational factor structuring the Muslim Brotherhood. Khalil al Anani, for example, frames the emergence of the Islamist blogosphere as the product of the youngest generation of Ikhwan. In Al-Anani's view, the Muslim Brotherhood is rigidly structured along generational lines. The first, the “Old Guard”, passed through Nasser's great repression, retains the highest posts within the organization, is resistant to change and inclined towards religious outreach and activism (*Da'wah*). The second one, the “pragmatists”, has on the contrary benefited from the more accommodating political climate under Sadat and is more open towards party politics. The third generation is identified with a neo-traditionalist ideology, closer to that the first one. Finally, there is what Al-Anani calls the “fourth generation”, which he defines as follows:

The fourth generational group, the youth, are in their 20s and early 30s, and most of them—particularly members from urban areas like Cairo, Alexandria, and Mansoura—are much more intellectually curious and open than the elder Brothers. This is partly due to the fact that this younger generation has not undergone the rigorous ideological indoctrination and organizational grooming that former generations of Brothers underwent, and also because the Brotherhood has tended to become more involved in political action than religious outreach over the last decade.

(Al Anani 2009: 3)

According to Lynch, it has now become “common” to analyze the differences and tensions within the organization in terms of generational differences (2007a). Of course, the proponents of this argument also note that such generational gaps pointing are the result of ideological and cultural differences. Both scholars tended to frame these internal shifts as a binary dichotomy opposing an older, traditionalist and conservative guard against a young, reformist and modern emerging intellectual current (Al Anani 2009; Lynch 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2007d). They followed the discussions on Islamist bloggers from the start, though Lynch would declare the “end” of what he called “the MB blogging spring” (2007e). Describing the engagement of Ikhwan with new media, Al Anani devises a linear model of development, according to which Islamist bloggers had developed through three stages of engagement -“news blogging”, “activist blogging” and “auto-critique” (Al Anani 2009).

There are several problematic points in these accounts. To begin with, at closer inspection the generational divide in terms of appreciation of blogging appears to be rather simplistic. Several

prominent leading figures maintained weblogs for some time²⁵⁴, such as Ibrahim al Za'farani²⁵⁵ and Abdel 'Atti²⁵⁶. Al Anani's stageist and linear analysis of the Islamist blogosphere is also problematic. In an interview, Moneim Mahmoud clarifies further by dividing the engagement of the Muslim Brotherhood with new technologies into two distinct moments:

The Brothers started using the internet in 1999. We were the first group to do that. At that time, we were students in the University of Cairo and we published the first student website in Egypt "Gama3a Online" (University Online) and there was a lot of buzz about it. [...] Concerning the blogging movement that started recently, some youth started writing on blogs especially after the success of the blog of Alaa [Abdel Fattah] and the blog of Al Wai Al Masri [Wael Abbas' blog] [...] When I thought about how to publish, I thought about a blog. I am proud of belonging to the Brotherhood movement as an idea before it became an organization. I decided to write on my blog "Ana Ikhwan", as Abd Al-Monem Mahmoud, the person who belongs to the idea of Brotherhood. This is how I wanted to present myself to people who would read the blog.

(in Ben Gharbia 2007)

Also, as I illustrated earlier on, Anani's second phase, the activist blogging phase, seems to be one of the earlier and most experimental engagement of young Islamists with new technology. The self-critical stage, Anani's third phase, was bound to be short-lived, for several dissident bloggers would later start leaving the organization or would be silenced or expelled²⁵⁷. Finally, digital activism was not simply replaced by a third phase, but rather morphed and migrated to other platforms, most notably Facebook²⁵⁸.

As for the reformist-conservative ideological divide, which Lynch is keen to use, things appear to be more complex. But an attempt to adjust or refine would be a useless exercise. If anything, if one pauses for a moment on the diversity of those animating the Islamist blogging scene and their subsequent political trajectories very few is left to be squarely put into either camps. Indeed, it is important to remember that the development of an Islamist blogosphere was a process which gained momentum through a constant dialogue and cooperation between young Islamists and other ideological and social groups.

The young and popular segments of the Ikhwan were involved in the Kefaya movement since the beginning. In fact, it is not a rare occurrence to find prominent Islamist bloggers taking part to

254For a complete list of 'mature' Ikhwan bloggers see Abdel Hamid, Rawdah. 2007. "List of Blogs maintained by Mature Bloggers" (in Arabic). Ikhwanonline, 8 October. Retrieved from *Internet Archive* at: <http://web.archive.org/web/20100409062641/http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.asp?ArtID=31397&SecID=303>

255Retrieved from *Internet Archive* at: <http://web.archive.org/web/20080521065044/http://zafarany.blogspot.com/>

256Retrieved from *Internet Archive* at: <http://abdelatti.blogspot.co.uk/>

257Personal email interview with A., September 2009.

258A good case in point here is represented by the blog *Ensaa* (Forget It!). Although its last post dates back to 2008, one can see that on February of the same year a page on Facebook was launched, which has continued to campaign, even at a greater degree, for the release of Khayrat el-Shater. See the Facebook page here (last accessed 09/09/12): <http://www.facebook.com/Eng.KhairatAlshater>

the formation and activities of emerging political groupings, such as the 6 April movement for instance, or more recently within the revolutionary front. It could be said that, just like leaders were pursuing a pragmatist approach to parliamentary politics, building electoral alliances and platforms with other political opposition groups such as the Wafd, the Labour Party or, later on, with the loose coalition of support gathered around Baradei, younger members were forging alliances and at times actually forming new political groupings with activists often distant from their ideological outlooks. Parallel to their rise within parliamentary politics, the grassroots was solidifying and further developing its participation and cooperation with liberals, leftists and the pro-democracy movement as a whole.

A highly representative example here is provided by the political biography of a young Islamist blogger, Mohamed Adel. Since August 2005, Adel maintained a blog under the nickname Mr. Meit²⁵⁹. He was a young member of the Ikhwan, and his Islamist affiliation were displayed and articulated even by the aesthetic dimension of his weblog. The headline, for example, is enriched by a background image that almost iconically reproduce the anticolonial history and ideology of the Ikhwan. This consists of a collage of different pictures representing the military aggressiveness of United States, the struggles of Palestine and a portrait of Hasan al-Banna with a protest banner of the Muslim Brotherhood. But Adel is also a co-founder and spokesperson of the 6 April movement. He was active within the movement since its first appearances on Facebook and he built transnational relations for the 6 April movement²⁶⁰.

The same discourse could be said about several examples. Among the most prominent figures coming out from the revolutionary groupings, two young political figures come from the Ikhwan. But they now militate in completely different groupings. Until late 2010, Mustafa al-Naggar maintained a blog whose affiliation with the MB was clear from the homepage: *Ana Ma3hom* (I am with them)²⁶¹. While being a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Naggar often called for cooperation with other political forces, encouraging especially young activists to overcome the ideological divisions and struggle towards common objectives and enemies:

[O]ur problem in Egypt is that the youth from every political and intellectual current does not communicate with each other, each one of us [regards] the other's idea as wrong, some Ikhwan consider leftists and Marxist Communists as atheists, some leftists imagine the Ikhwan as some kind of ferocious extraterrestrial excommunicating everyone and refusing to accept pluralism and diversity. [...] [We need] to join forces and live hoping

259Please note that the blog hosted at the following link has been deleted: <http://43arb.info/meit>

260As Tina Rosenberg has reported, shortly after their 2008 virtual exploits when the movement launched a Facebook page, in solidarity with striking workers in Mahalla, reaching 70,000 subscribers Mohamed Adel flew to Belgrade and attended the seminars organized by *Otpor* and the Center for Applied NonViolent Action and Strategies, or CANVAS. For a full account see Rosenberg (2011).

261<http://anam3ahom.blogspot.co.uk/>

for change [...] this is our battle, this is our land and our future [...] an assault on a leftist is an assault on Egypt, the detention of Ikhwan members is a shock for Egypt, the trials of noble men and the fabrication of charges against them is a crime [...] tyranny will never leave anyone of us alone, but every national groups can play a role in this battle.²⁶²

However, despite his attempts to overcome the ideological differences dividing the Muslim Brotherhood from the rest of the political spectrum, Al-Naggar would eventually pursue a different path. Shortly before the revolution, he first campaigned for el-Baradei and then contributed to the formation of the liberal Al-Adl Party (Egyptian Election Watch 2011). Al-Naggar's example is not an isolated case, for several young MB bloggers first tried to engage the group from within and then ended up distancing themselves. Although his trajectory would take him to pursue a different direction, the same can be said about another prominent young member of the Muslim Brotherhood, Islam Lotfy. A lawyer and blogger²⁶³, he would first enter the Revolutionary Youth Coalition and then found, together with another young Ikhwan, Mohamed al-Kassas, *Tayyar Masri* (Egyptian Current Party), a party largely in support of Abdel Moneim Abul Futouh²⁶⁴.

As the number of MB blogs continued to grow, harsh confrontations with the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood multiplied, and so did the number of those distancing themselves from the decisions and ideological outlook of senior members. The release of the 2007 draft party platform, in particular, would provide enough arguments for discussion. This the same document whose “gray zones” were addressed by political analysts and think tanks (Brown *et al.* 2006; Brown and Hamzawy 2008; Hamzawy *et al.* 2007; Ottaway and Hamzawy 2008). They were tackled by young MB members who, through their own blogs, questioned the place and role of Islam in the political and ideological outlook of the Muslim Brotherhood. This debate exposes the constitutive tension between *da'awah* and *siyyasah*, or *hizbiyyah* following Meijer (1997; 2009), noted while comparing the Arabic website with Ikhwanweb.

In this case, however, the two camps were internal to the Muslim Brotherhood, and saw a young MB blogger, Abdel Moneim Mahmoud, raising some critical questions about the outlook of a political party and confronting the leadership of the organization. Shortly after Mahdi Akef, the Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, announced the imminent release of a political party program, Abdel Moneim wrote a post reporting the opinions of those involved in preliminary discussions. The most pressing question, in Mahmoud's opinion, was the way in which such a political party was to be conceived:

262Al-Naggar, Mustafa. 2007. “Why am I with Them?” (in Arabic). *Ana Ma3hom*, 2 May. <http://anam3ahom.blogspot.co.uk/2007/05/blog-post.html>

263Al-Kawakby: <http://kawakby.blogspot.co.uk/>

264See a short profile at: <http://egyptelections.carnegieendowment.org/2011/10/06/islam-lotfy> (Last accessed: 09/09/12).

Most of those noble people in the Society [...] do not understand the meaning of party and political work because the education within the Society is absolutely romantic, [...] they cannot understand the meaning of citizenship, [...] [nor that of] accepting the other, I also met some people who did not understand the concept of forging alliances with other political currents. [...] The most important question is: will the group accept the idea of a political party and its role in society as a reformist agent, whose role is societal, cultural and civilizational even before political directions and demands for parliamentary seats, or will [this party] continue to be an arm of the comprehensive [shamil] vision of the group?²⁶⁵

With the term “shamil”, the blogger was pointing at the traditional ideological outlook of the organization, which in his view would have prevailed against more secular and pragmatic concerns. Indeed, Ali Abdel Fattah would publish a reply to Moneim's critiques, defending the all-comprehensive vision of the Muslim Brotherhood and urging those who raised them not to lose sight of the main objective. Abdel Fattah's rebuttal remember the critics that Islam is the main “reference” for the Muslim Brotherhood:

The Muslim brotherhood prides themselves for their development of an Islam as an all-comprehensive concept, which does not distinguish between religion and state, between da'wah and politics [...] Some secularists critiqued the [political] program of the Muslim Brotherhood, they object to the Islamic reference of the Muslim Brotherhood [...] but the Muslim Brotherhood say that it is necessary that we go back to Islam in every facet of life. Yet they do not understand [...] why do some Islamists and leading figures of the Islamist movement follow others' examples on this matters [...]? Will the compass slip from those hands turning them away from the goal?²⁶⁶

Abdel Moneim will post a reply to Abdel Fattah's critique, arguing that religion is a matter of personal belief and that his convictions did not allow them to use 'secularist' as a pejorative term to disqualify his opponents in this the debate. For what the blogger was arguing in fact represent, in his view, the moderate, centrist approach of the group:

I think that any Muslim is proud of having been educated according to this noble religion which came with a comprehensive message for the renaissance of the Ummah, but the engineer Ali's following sentence claims that such a religion does not distinguish between da'awy and siyyasi and here the discourse becomes strange and dangerous [...] [for] by expressing his personal convictions he enters the domain of religion and belief as if those who disagree with him are outside religion and those who distinguish between da'awah and politics, who actually follow the centrist approach of the group, become secularists.²⁶⁷

These are but few examples that point to a much larger confrontational process shaping the

265Mahmoud, Abdel Moneim. 2007. “Society's Party or Party's Society?” (in Arabic). *Ana Ikhwan*, 29 September. http://ana-ikhwan.blogspot.co.uk/2007/09/blog-post_29.html

266Abdel Fattah, Ali. 2007. “Islam is Our Reference” (in Arabic). *Ikhwanonline*, 27 October. Retrieved from *Internet Archive* at : <http://web.archive.org/web/20071121130506/http://www.ikhwanonline.com/print.asp?ArtID=31704&SecID=390>

267Mahmoud, Abdel Moneim. 2007. “Dangerous Suspicion ... a Clarificatory Response” (in Arabic). *Ana Ikhwan*, 29 October. http://ana-ikhwan.blogspot.co.uk/2007/10/blog-post_29.html

contemporary outlook of the Muslim Brotherhood. What contributed to the growth of the Islamist blogosphere was the fact that, through blogging, they were not only able to by-pass the rigid organizational hierarchies, but also to challenge political strategies and internal decision-making process. As one blogger has put it, without blogging they would not have been able to engage in a dialogue with prominent leading figures such as Essam al Erian or Abdel Moneim Abul Futouh²⁶⁸. Furthermore, they reversed the old adagio disciplining the internal dynamics of the movement. rule of internal conduct, turning to its head. “Listen and Obey”, the rule of conduct prescribing deference and respect for Ikhwan higher authorities, would be turned into an urge to employ critique. This new emphasis on the exercise of critique to improve is surely one of the most fundamental usages which the practice of blogging has served. And it is also where the division between a well placed leadership and a grassroots level struggling to find representation becomes crucial. This is evident in a post of one of Essam el Erian's daughter who, while lamenting the fact that elder member would not listen to their youth expresses clearly this new disposition:

we do not criticize just to criticize ... I criticize because in my view this is wrong ... and if you are opposed to me then we engage in a discussion ... I criticize because I am endowed with thought and opinion and I want to improve.²⁶⁹

(El Eryan 2007)

Blogging, in this respect, provided a platform enabling young and marginalized currents within the Muslim Brotherhood to voice their concerns and become politically visible and relevant. Their activism would become even more confrontational in occasion of significant events for the organization. The criticism of the young Islamist bloggers would become particularly harsh during internal elections and processes of decision-making, when they rejected the validity of leadership's choices and in some cases denounced their machinations to hold positions of power and maintain the status quo within the Muslim Brotherhood. One of such occurrence has taken place in 2009, when the entire Guidance Office was reshuffled and a new Chairman was elected. The election of Mohammed Badie and the exclusion from the Guidance Office of prominent figures in line with young Islamists was, to many, a clear sign of the leadership's willingness to hold their positions and ideological line. While reporting these events, a young and influential MB bloggers subtly hinted at the political manoeuvring within the organization and refused to recognize as valid these decisions:

Abulfotoh is the only member in the Guidance Council that is considered as “reformist”, with excluding him from the new form of the bureau, we can say: The Conservatives

268Personal email interview with A. (September 2009).

269El-Erian, Asmaa, 2007. “I criticize ... even my own opinion” (in Arabic). Banaat el-Erian, June. http://banatelerian.blogspot.co.uk/2007/06/blog-post_03.html

won! [...] I don't want to write to criticize the election's results, I just want to write down my testimony that I –as a Muslim Brotherhood Member- am refusing the elections, I'm refusing the way of holding the elections, the results of the elections and the new executive office members! I'm refusing all these points because I want to be honest on Hassan Albanna's heritage, I can't accept Sayed Qutb's ideology in Muslim Brotherhood, and it's clear that the new office will adopt the Qutbic Ideology, most of the office members were arrested with Sayyed Qutb in 1965.²⁷⁰

One is confronted once again with Ayyash's urge to record his position: “I just want to write down my testimony”. It is only with the act of recording, of freezing one's position that the latter becomes visible. This is, in my view, the most crucial dimension and role being played by digital technologies, both within and outside specific social movements. The engagement of young Islamists was neither the work of blind militants nor that of opportunistic strategists. By going online, while some of their initiative undoubtedly benefited the organization, young Islamists also brought to surface a diversity that resulted tightly controlled and disciplined.

Unable to find venues to articulate their dissenting views, they found in the internet, first, and then on blogging the only archives enabling them to sanction their diversity. Rather than generating a united “reformist” front, this difference has instead exploded in multiple directions. It was an exodus, a centrifugal process initiated and performed by individual members, despite the fact that it was not a collectively planned decision. Yet, in doing so they posed an even more fundamental political threat to the leadership of the Ikhwan. By voicing their dissent, not only did they undermine their hegemonic pretense to represent 'Islam' in the political realm, but they also exposed as a fiction the possibility of a unitary vision of an Islamist movement.

Conclusion

In this chapter I reconstructed the historical development of the Islamist blogosphere related to the Muslim Brotherhood. I first reviewed existing theoretical approaches to the practice of blogging. Weblogs have a history intimately tied not only to developments within the media sector but also to political dynamics and events. After the emergence of a thriving blogosphere, scholars concerned themselves with investigating the cultural and political implications of blogging. Among these, I choose to follow terranova's materialist critique of cyberspace. Her notion of free labor is, in my view, well equipped to analyze the usage of digital technologies in the political communication strategies implemented by the Muslim Brotherhood.

Scholars and observers often approach this matter through preconceived notions of the

²⁷⁰Ayyash, Abdel Rahman. 2009. “The timeline of Qutbism Era starting!”. *2bEgyptian*, 26 December. <http://2-b-egyptian.blogspot.co.uk/2009/12/timeline-of-qutbism-era-starting.html>

subjects producing weblogs. There is a tendency to see the impressive amount of media initiatives developed by the Brotherhood as simply the result of a great operation of public relation and image perception. Members performing this work are often depicted as blind militant obeying leadership's instructions. However, as I hope to have demonstrated, the engagement of the Ikhwan with new technologies was not only the product of a rather complex set of motivations, affects and experiences. It was also the site and means of both hegemonic claims and resistance practices.

Some scholars such as Al Anani and Lynch frame these internal tensions through binary division along ideological and/or generational lines. However, if one focuses on the extremely varying range of political trajectories and personal biographies it is possible to see that such an analytical framework is highly reductive. What is more, it fails to take into account a much more fundamental political threat moved by dissenting young Islamist bloggers. Rather than forming a unitary “reformist” camp, these young members have exploded the organization in multiple directions. In so doing, not only did they radically undermine the leadership hegemonic claims over the organization and Egypt, but their dissent de facto renders impossible to realize a unitary representation of political Islam.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I shall now briefly sum up the arguments and problematiques presented in this research project. The thesis is divided into six chapters. The first two chapters aim at positioning the proposed theoretical argument in relation to both social movement and new media studies, the latter with particular reference to existing scholarship on Arab media. Chapter three briefly outlines the historical context and the political trajectory of the Muslim Brotherhood, from its establishment to present days. The remaining three chapters propose a selection of cases of study examined through the theoretical lens suggested in the initial two chapters.

Chapter one discussed the existing scholarship relevant to the study of social movements in general and Islamist movements in particular. A genealogy of such a disciplinary area is complex and heterogeneous, for it has moved from being firmly located within the Orientalist tradition to being influenced and shaped by several disciplines, from anthropology to comparative politics and, more recently, social movement studies. Having reviewed the body of knowledge produced in western contexts, I then discussed the literature on political Islam, focusing in particular on Bayat's concept of social nonmovements.

The notion of multitude, against which Bayat defines his nonmovements, points to a far richer and productive movement of thought. Autonomist Marxism, which Hardt and Negri (2000; 2004; 2009) contributed to develop, consists of a heterogeneous reading of Marx's oeuvre which is not exhausted by these authors' scholarship. It is first of all a conscious project to revive the critique of political economy, materialism and the emancipatory project of communism through a critical engagement with post-structuralism and subaltern studies. As a result, this Marxian current contributed to revive class analysis by providing it with conceptual tools such as class composition, immaterial labour and the production of the common, for example, while at the same time opening up to issues such as gender and race. What is even more relevant, scholars working within this current offer valid insights on new media and cultural production.

While retaining an analytical focus on class struggles and social movements, in the works of authors such as Virno (2004) and Terranova (2004) digital technologies play a crucial role and they are frequently considered as primary objects of analysis. The concept of immaterial labour, in particular, through which an informational commons is cooperatively produced is a particularly valid alternative to liberal theories of activism. Under this light, not only can digital activism be framed as a productive praxis but it can also be envisioned as embedded in and traversed by relations of power. It is at this point that it is possible to elaborate a convergence between media studies and theories of social movements, as well as a materialist reading of cultural production

which would consider the crucial contribution of social movement. However, the theoretical framework formulated by autonomists can be further refined.

In order to do so, however, I first positioned this move in relation to both media studies and the specific historical context. This was the subject of chapter two, which considered existing scholarship and debates on new media and political activism. I first provided a brief historical background to trace the emergence of an Egyptian blogosphere. As noted by Sreberny and Khiabany while discussing the Iranian cyberspace (2010), the Egyptian state, too, appears to be in the paradoxical condition. On the one hand, under the imperatives of knowledge-based economy, the regime enacted a series of projects and policies aiming at augmenting the internet penetration and the diffusion of digital technologies. Yet, on the other hand, the very same measures produced the conditions for the emergence of a politicized blogging scene, created by net pioneers and activists who territorialized the cyberspace with alternative media outlets.

The growing media activism and visibility of militant bloggers attracted the interest of both mainstream media and academic circles. The study of digital technologies contributed to enrich the scholarship on Arab media studies. Just like social movement theory, this nascent field of research has a rather complex genealogy. The US tradition of political communication and British cultural studies have a strong influence. Having reviewed the main theoretical approaches elaborated within this disciplinary area, I then proceeded to include a perspective informed by autonomist Marxism, discussed in chapter one. However, despite the scholarly interest on new media and digital technologies, I find that the instrumentalist conceptualization of media -as 'machines', or 'tools'- can be further refined. In order to do so, I suggest to employ the concept of archive to define the role played by digital technologies used by contemporary social movements. Though the concept was initially developed within literary studies, in late 1990s it was used as an analytical tool in both postcolonial and media studies.

The rationale for such a theoretical move is twofold. It first allows me to refine, from a media perspective, the theoretical reflections of autonomist Marxism, whose insights on cognitive capitalism and immaterial labour constitute the analytical premise upon which the concept of archive is built. Also, by referring to a crucial power/knowledge institution, such a notion enables me to retain an analytical focus on power relations traversing and constituting both digital technologies and their users. What is more, as an object endowed with material life, the concept of archive is well equipped to capture the way in which media are cultivated, worked upon and ultimately constructed by the labour of subjects who are in turn constituted by this engagement. Having fully articulated its theoretical argument, the thesis then applied it to a selection of cases of study. However, before doing so, the political trajectory of the Muslim Brotherhood is placed within

the broader historical context.

Chapter three deals precisely with this subject. It reconstructs the evolution of the Muslim Brotherhood from its emergence until present. While it may be simplistic to divide their history according to the succession of Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak, it is however important to remember that these regimes had different relationships with the movement, and this helps us to explain more clearly some of their distinctive features. A troubled, confrontational relationship with Nasser's regime will lead the group to a long period of harsh repression, which will also trigger a process of ideological revision. Under Sadat, the Ikhwan were able to resume their political activism since they were regarded as a useful counterweight to leftist movements. During this period, the Muslim Brotherhood will establish the political conditions for successive electoral exploits in parliamentary politics. Mubarak will opt for a mixed strategy to deal with the Ikhwan, alternating between containment and repression.

This troubled history between the Society and Egyptian regimes has been framed in various ways. Hisham 'Awady (2004), for example, explains it as a battle for political legitimacy, whereas Bayat conceived of it as a Gramscian war of position (2007). I argue that the political trajectory of the movement is to be read against the background of state of exception, in which the Ikhwan embodied, as Agamben notes (1998), that exclusion upon which the exception is founded. While Bayat argues that political Islam has entered their post-Islamist phase, I contend that the neoliberal state of exception constitutes the ideological and disciplinary matrix shaping the contours of an encounter between Islamist movements and neoliberalism. Where Bayat (2010) tries to conceive of post-Islamism as both a condition and project to marry Islam with democracy, I argue that both parties and their encounter have to be historically situated and specified.

In doing so, one can design a richer and more nuanced scenario, which the Muslim Brotherhood navigated through. Also, by historically locating such an encounter, it is possible to expose the complex set of relationships that have contributed to shape it. While it is true that the group was harshly confronted by the regime, it is equally certain that the leadership was well positioned within higher strata of Egyptian society and was capable to make huge inroads into several societal domains. The engagement with new media, in particular, was dictated by the same strategy, for it was a way to elude the ban imposed on the organization. Such a move did allow the group to circumvent those restrictions and initiate a dialogue with research agencies and think tanks in the region. From this perspective, where Bayat sees a potential marriage between Islam and democracy, one can see that the Islamist movement was in fact assessed according to the requirement of neoliberal democracy.

The specificity of such an encounter emerges more clearly in chapter four, which examines

the MB official website in English. This media outlet is particularly interesting because it can be conceived as the apex of Ikhwan hegemonic projection. Not only did Ikhwanweb enable the Muslim Brotherhood to assert its hegemonic claims at a regional and national level, but it also allowed the group to engage in a dialogue with the “West”. What characterizes this website is the objective of articulating a discursive rupture within the tradition of the Muslim Brotherhood, shifting from an emphasis on religion to a more secularized rhetoric and the adoption of western techniques and practices of communication. In doing so, the website aimed at directly engaging western policy-making circles, while addressing their perception about the Muslim Brotherhood. In this regard, Ikhwanweb devoted particular attention to dissociate the group from political violence in general, and al-Qaeda in particular.

Elaborating upon the concept of archive, I argue that they form the two main *archival topologies* constituting the website. Having built an archive of statements and resources showing both willingness to engage in dialogue with “the West” and dissociation from political violence, the Muslim Brothers created the presuppositions for these attitudes to become uncontested. At the same time, however, the analysis of these threads also reveals that the Ikhwan are trapped, as Dabashi has it, in a “colonially fabricated binary” between “Islam and the West”, so that “when the subaltern speaks s/he speaks the language of its oppressors” (2009: 175). The correspondence and interaction between Ikhwanweb and think tanks such as Brookings and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace ultimately illustrates the point theorized in chapter three. What Bayat envisions as an encounter between Islam and democracy as such, it actually unfolds as a disciplinary encirclement where the ideological outlook of the Muslim Brotherhood is evaluated and shaped according to the requirements of neoliberal democracy.

A completely different agenda appear to have guided the launch of Ikhwanonline, the MB official website in Arabic. In chapter five, the website is first described and then compared with its counterpart in English. To begin with, Ikhwanonline precedes Ikhwanweb and acts as the main portal for Arabic-speaking readers as well as ordinary members of the Muslim Brotherhood. Significant differences emerge right from the aesthetic choices made to design the website, as they clearly represent continuity with both the political tradition of the Ikhwan as well as the Islamic ethos in general. One must first note that the Arabic website displays the MB traditional logo, whereas the website in English does not. Ikhwanonline also uses both Gregorian and Islamic calendar as well as GMT and Mecca time, whereas its English counterpart only uses western calendar and GMT.

However, the most significant differences emerge once one consider the editorial practices to organize, select and produce content. While Ikhwanweb was very much concern with monitoring

the production of knowledge about the Muslim Brotherhood, its Arabic counterpart does not collect material from western media and research agencies. On the contrary, it devotes entire sections to collect and display internal resources. The history of the organization as well as the personal profiles of leading members and intellectual figures is assigned a prominent role. This rather inward-looking disposition is even more emphasized in a particular section providing updates about weddings, funerals and other events relevant for the community life of the Muslim Brotherhood. It thus becomes evident that the two websites were built with and imagined two specific audiences. Where Ikhwanweb was launched to tackle the “western” perceptions about the movement, Ikhwanonline acts as the group's official website, thus reaching out the internal audience of ordinary members.

Another difference worth being noted is the emphasis given to the concept of *da'wah*. Ikhwanonline devotes an entire section to explain the relevance of such a notion, providing both original texts as well as news updates about conferences, events and seminars. So important is the infusion of a religious ethos in the political praxis that, while profiling leading members of the organization, their missionary history and achievements represent a constant feature in the construction of their personae. This appears to be rather different from the discursive shift theorized by Khaled Hamza (2009), editor in chief of the English website. While Ikhwanweb elaborates a rhetoric to downplay the religious tone, its counterpart in Arabic does exactly the opposite, proudly displaying and articulating it throughout the website.

However, rather than deploying the usual Orientalist assumption about the duplicitous character of the 'Arab', I contend that this is a constitutive tension shaping the outlook and internal equilibria of the movement. While a more secularizing tendency attempts to opt more decidedly for party politics and parliamentary democracy, the opposing camp retains the value of tradition and accords primacy to the missionary work of spreading the religious message in society. Roel Meijer (1997; 2009) used the terms *hizbiyyah* and *da'awi* to indicate respectively the first and the latter camp.

It is precisely this constitutive tension that one can see at work in chapter six. The last chapter looked at a much more fleeting sample of Ikhwan-related media, focusing on the emergence of an Islamist blogosphere developed by members and sympathizers of the Muslim Brotherhood. Inspired by Kefaya activists and their engagement with digital technologies, young Islamists began using blogging as a tool of political communication. Initially, the main drive behind the creation of weblogs was the need to have a venue to campaign against the waves of repression enacted by the Egyptian regime against members of the Muslim Brotherhood. Khalil al-Anani outlines a linear model to explain the emergence of the MB blogosphere: from experimentation through advocacy to

self-criticism.

Such an explanatory framework is rather problematic, for it appears that all these functions were served at both early stages as well as following periods. By the same token, the emphasis on the demographic factor is rather risky. Several senior members were active online, the organization itself was launching websites since at least the late 1990s, and Khaled Hamza, who is credited for encouraging the MB youth to start blogging, cannot be said to belong to what al-Anani calls the tech-savvy “fourth generation” (Hamza 2009). To be true, the emergence of an Ikhwan-related blogging scene was first marked by the mushrooming of advocacy blogs, established to campaign for the release of detained MB members. In this respect, practices of digital activism allowed the Muslim Brotherhood to show a commitment to human rights and the rule of law, creating opportunities to dialogue with both internal opposition forces as well as the international community.

However, the very same media outlets proved to be a double-edged sword for the organization. For as soon as the number of MB bloggers grew, internal differences and tensions were exposed. On many occasions, conflicting views were framed along that constitutive tension encountered while examining Ikhwanonline. The two main ideological outlooks *-da'awi* and *siyyasi-* confronted each other in decision-making processes as well as strategic choices. Through their blogs, young MB bloggers directly engaged the leadership of the movement, calling for more cooperation with other political forces on the ground and for an ideological revision leading the group to the formation of a political party autonomous from the traditional outlook of its religious arm. However, while their activism may have greatly benefited the organization and helped spread their hegemony, the internal difference exposed by MB bloggers proliferated and exploded in multiple directions. Even though many of them left the organization without achieving the change they envisioned, this diffuse exodus actually undermined the MB hegemonic claims to represent One country, let alone One Islam, and puts the movement in a permanent crisis of representation.

To sum up, it is important to note that the the Muslim Brotherhood greatly benefited from digital technologies. But in no way was such an engagement free of exploding contradictions and ambivalent outcomes. In this regard, the analysis of one website such as Ikhwanweb shows quite clearly that, if it did allow the movement to circumvent the restrictions imposed by the regime, at the same time the website exposed the group to another set of power relations. In this regard, the comparative framework used in chapter five contributed to specify the main features characterizing both websites, as well as their differences. Finally, the analysis of MB blogs added further emphasis on the complex set of interaction shaping internal debates and institutional arrangements.

The concept of archive proved helpful in applying what one might call a micro-analytics of

power to the analysis of these media outlets. As a theoretical tool, it is equipped to examine the medium in question in its material, formal/aesthetic, and semiotic dimensions. Indeed, if understood as a discursive dispositif, following Foucault (1972: 145-146), the archive also lends itself to a materialist analysis of cultural politics. This line of research, however, might benefit from further refinement. At a methodological level, for example, it could be possible to envision ways to quantify the results and visualize them. The concept might also be used, with a refined theoretical argument, to examine the construction of subjectivity through blogging, focusing on such elements such as race, gender and cultural identity in general. Another line of investigation would broaden the geographical scope, so as to include more decidedly the transnational connections cultivated by social movements. I hope that this research will make its small contribution to develop them and enrich the discussion.

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