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Citation: Arafat, R. (2022). Rethinking digital media use for diasporic political participation: An investigation into journalism advocacy, digital activism, and democratic divides (Dissertation summary). *Studies in Communication Sciences*, 22(3), pp. 561-574. doi: 10.24434/j.scoms.2022.03.3878

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Rethinking digital media use for diasporic political participation: An investigation into journalism advocacy, digital activism, and democratic divides (Dissertation summary)

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Swiss Association of Communication and Media Research (SACM) – Dissertation Award 2022

Rana Arafat was awarded the SACM Dissertation Prize 2022, which honors the best PhD thesis in communication and media research completed at a Swiss university or by a Swiss researcher. SComS is happy to publish a summary of Rana Arafat's (Università della Svizzera italiana, USI) winning PhD thesis entitled "Rethinking digital media use for diasporic political participation: An investigation into journalism advocacy, digital activism, and democratic divides".

Abstract

By presenting five studies on connected research questions, this cumulative dissertation develops a novel understanding of the concept of *Hybrid Diasporic Public Sphere* by examining how three groups of diasporic exiles, including journalists, activists, and ordinary refugees settled in democratic states, use digital media to engage in transnational conflicts and advocate for political and social change in their homelands. The study demonstrates that the roles of the three diasporic political actors are highly interactive, overlapping, and complementary and their digitally-empowered collaborations blur boundaries between their normative role distinctions creating new interchanging political logics, norms, and practices. The novel contribution of this thesis lies at three levels. First, it redefines diaspora journalism in conflict contexts by examining the Syrian journalists' media advocacy strategies and digital networks that blend activism, human rights advocacy, and social movements. Second, it further identifies five barriers to the digital diasporic political participation of ordinary refugees demonstrating new forms of democratic divides. Third, the study develops the concept of *connected diaspora activist* identifying the current challenges that undermine the potential of social media use for mobilizing a political change in non-revolutionary times. The dissertation employs four qualitative research methods including digital ethnography, content analysis, metajournalistic discourse analysis, and a total of 94 in-depth interviews.

Keywords

online political participation, diaspora journalism advocacy, democratic divide, diasporic digital activism

1 Introduction

Deterritorialized beyond their origin countries, diaspora populations serve as transnational political actors, share networks constructed around identity or a cause, and mediate their homeland conflicts as peace-makers or peace-wreckers (Boichak, 2019; Smith & Stares, 2007). Diasporic exiles can enact an indirect political influence on their home countries by sending financial remittances (Meseguer & Burgess, 2014) and exchanging social remittances includ-

ing "ideas, behaviors, identities, and social capital" (Levitt, 1998, p. 927). They also engage in a wide range of activities to mobilize a direct transnational political change through supporting candidates, parties, or policies, making financial contributions to political campaigns, exercising expatriate political rights, lobbying home governments, as well as financing homeland elections (Meseguer & Burgess, 2014, pp. 2–3).

The proliferation of new media and digital technologies empowered diasporic communities to create alternative online



political spaces to engage in the homeland regime opposition and mobilize a collective action from a distance (Bernal, 2020). Their digital connectivity opened up opportunities for developing and maintaining the diasporic public sphere that refers to “the political arena wherein the diaspora expresses its political views, discusses its project for the homeland and the diaspora, interacts with host land and homeland government officials and politicians, and reflects on its contribution to society” (Laguerre, 2005, p. 207). This diasporic digital sphere allows participation of various diasporic communities who “are often racial, ethnic, and linguistic minorities in their country of settlement” (Zou, 2020, p. 230).

By presenting five studies on connected research questions (3 published, one accepted, and one in peer review), this cumulative dissertation adopts a comparative and interdisciplinary approach to examine the online political behavior of three groups of Arab diasporic exiles including journalists, activists, and ordinary refugees. It argues that the three diasporic groups can no longer be studied as separate transnational change agents, as previously found in the literature. To create the digital diasporic public sphere and mobilize for a change in homeland politics, the roles of the three counterpublics are highly interactive, overlapping, and complementary (Holm, 2019) proposing new forms of hybridity. To this end, the paper investigates how the three conflict-generated refugee diasporas, moving from authoritarian to democratic states, employ distinctive digital tactics and consume/produce diverse online political content to engage in transnational conflicts, advocate for political and social change, and mobilize democratic goals in their homelands. More importantly, it further examines how these different Arab diasporic actors use digital media to interact and cooperate with each other and with various local, international, and transnational actors in the diasporic public sphere. In so doing, the paper re-examines the concept of hybridity in the transnational digital context proposing the notion of (*hybrid*) *diasporic*

public sphere to explain how these digitally-empowered interactive collaborations blur boundaries between the normative role distinctions of the different diasporic actors and introduce novel interchanging and complementary political logics, roles, and practices. This requires understanding how diaspora journalists engage in various forms of advocacy and activism (*papers 1 & 2*), how ordinary refugees engage in producing news and channeling online information to voice their political opinions (*papers 3 & 4*), and how diaspora activists engage in the mundane everyday politics, human rights activism, and relief work that involve close connection with the two previous groups (*paper 5*).

Drawing on a wide range of qualitative research methods including digital ethnography, qualitative content analysis, metajournalistic discourse analysis, and a total of 94 in-depth interviews with Arab refugees in Switzerland, the study aims to answer two overarching research questions:

RQ1: How do Arab diaspora journalists, activists, and ordinary non-activist refugees use digital media to engage in transnational political participation in their homelands?

RQ2: How do the three diasporic refugee groups collaborate and interact in the digital sphere? And what hybrid political logics, roles, and practices do these digitally-empowered collaborations create?

2 Literature review and theoretical framework

To identify the knowledge gaps and dissertation’s conceptual contributions, this section provides an introductory overview of the literature on diasporic public sphere, diaspora journalism, and digital media use for diasporic political participation.

2.1 The diasporic digital public sphere

The concept of diaspora was used by many scholars studying different settled migratory groups and its definition has changed

over time. As Bostrom, Brown, and Cechvala (2016, p. 2) argued, diaspora

connotes a very strong orientation vis-à-vis the homeland, often based on an experience or shared memory of displacement, subsequent settlement in two or more locations outside of the country of origin, and the collective idea or myth of the homeland.

The concept was originally used to describe the exiled Jews who were dispersed throughout many lands, reflecting the oppression and moral degradation following the dispersion (Safran, 1991).

The rapid adoption of mobile telephones and social media platforms enabled virtual communities “to form, grow, and organize transnational networks quickly” (Bostrom et al., 2016, p. 13), allowing the creation and development of diasporic public spheres (Appadurai, 1996; Laguerre, 2005). Both diasporic media and Internet usage play a crucial role in shaping the public-sphere activity in these diaspora communities altering the meanings of community, citizenship, and nation (Appadurai, 1996; Bernal, 2005). What differentiates this diasporic public sphere from other public spheres is how it incorporates the online and offline dimensions where the sphere of interaction expands from the local to the global involving other non-diasporic groups such as the homeland individuals (Laguerre, 2005). This diasporic sphere allows the participation of various diasporic populations (Zou, 2020) including diaspora journalists, activists, and non-activist refugee groups. While diasporic opposition actors build online platforms to counter the misrepresentation of ethnic minorities in the mainstream media in the host country, they also counter the homeland state media’s narratives, reveal the regime’s violations, and mobilize a transnational collective action (Bernal, 2020), forming what Fraser (1990, p. 67) described as “subaltern counterpublics.”

Hence, this dissertation moves the discussion on diasporic public sphere forward by examining different forms of hybrid digital practices, interactions, and

collaborations among three groups of Arab diasporic counterpublics engaging in political participation and conflict involvement in their homelands. The diasporic groups involve exiled Syrian journalists in Europe and Turkey as well as Arab activist and non-activist refugee communities in Switzerland.

2.2 Diaspora journalists, conflict, and political change

Living in exile from repressive homelands, diaspora journalists play crucial roles in mobilizing change in undemocratic societies and creating new platforms for scrutinizing and lobbying home governments (Ekwo, 2011). Diaspora media, created by and for diasporic groups (Bozdog, Hepp, & Suna, 2012), provide platforms for “self-expression, the representation of cultural artefacts and the contestation of negative stereotypes by migrant people in the public sphere” (Ogunyemi, 2015, p. 1). The networked communication environments have facilitated the diaspora journalists’ adoption of activism by providing opportunities for transnational engagement in conflict mediation and resolution, as well as advocacy for social movements and political causes in the homelands (Sözeri, 2016). This places diaspora media in “a unique position which enables them to circumvent regime censorship and spread their content through cross-border networks and collaborations with citizen journalists, on-the-ground correspondents, and media platforms” (Kämpe, 2017, p. 49). To this end, diaspora journalists serve a dual role as a “window on the world” that channels updated information and a “mirror” that reflects back the conflict details and its consequences to their audiences (Ogunyemi, 2017, p. 1). For example, Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka (JDS) used their exile to access the political spaces they were previously denied and document violations and mass atrocities during the war (Balasundaram, 2019). Similarly, the transnational flow of information created by the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), a Burmese diasporic opposition media organization, challenged the authoritarian rule, political

violence, and censorship and supported the democratization process in a repressive military regime (Pidduck, 2012).

However, the literature has not fully addressed how opposition diaspora journalists develop and promote various advocacy strategies through creating online news websites that challenge the restrictions on the flow of information on the one hand, while building digital networks for defending, rescuing, and training the local journalistic community under threat, on the other. To bridge the knowledge gaps, the dissertation incorporates two papers to examine how the Syrian diaspora journalists mediate the ongoing civil war in their homeland by promoting social and political causes in two unique ways; through news reporting and online advocacy networks. *Paper 1* examines nine content-related advocacy strategies in the anti-regime Syrian diaspora news outlets and advances a definition of *diaspora advocacy journalism*. *Paper 2* further proposes four novel journalistic roles for promoting newsafety from exile through journalists' digital advocacy networks.

2.3 Diasporic digital activism and political participation

Diaspora journalists are not the only diasporic group who serve crucial roles in influencing and shaping the political discourse and conflicts in their homelands. Previous scholars have elucidated the engagement of other activist and non-activist diasporic populations in the politics and conflicts of their origin countries surpassing the territorial and political boundaries of states (e.g., Itzigsohn, 2000; Ghorashi & Boersma, 2009; Hanlin, 2010). As Adamson (2020, p. 150) argued, "opposition groups and political activists can mobilize beyond the territorial limits of the state, thus bypassing some of the constraints to political organization found in authoritarian states." Using their institutional and network structures, the diasporic communities serve as significant actors in the local and transnational politics by providing tangible and intangible resources such as money and weapons to support armed conflicts or mediate conflict settlement

(Smith, 2007). The Arab Spring uprisings gave an important example of how diaspora dissidents employed various digital media platforms for transnational mobilization challenging their home-country autocrats. Although the rebellion's needs, geopolitical support, activist resources, and access to the front lines affected how and to what extent the different Arab diaspora groups played a role in the anti-regime revolts (Moss, 2020a, p. 1669), some of these groups shared similar digital practices. For example, social media allowed diaspora activists from Libya, Yemen, and Syria to create direct connections between the local dissidents under siege and the international mainstream media outlets decreasing their isolation and disseminate information that was previously censored (Moss, 2020b). The Syrian uprisings have also witnessed various networked collaborations between the diaspora activists and professional journalists (Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013).

Reviewing literature on diasporic political participation highlights two important knowledge gaps. First, little is known about the factors that encourage or hinder the online diasporic political participation of refugee communities, especially those moving between authoritarian and democratic regimes, and how the refugees' online political behavior might differ from one social media platform to another. Second, while the literature has focused on the digital activism practices of Arab diasporic populations in revolutionary times, examining the digital diasporic activism during the non-revolutionary and non-conflict times that create different demands and exigencies for a sustained action has been insufficiently explored. To bridge these research gaps, *paper 3* examines the facilitators and barriers that influence and / or shape the online political participation of diasporic non-activist populations while *paper 4* investigates the different roles of traditional and digital media in fostering political re-socialization of Arab refugees into the democratic norms and values of the Swiss country. Taking a further step, *paper 5* shifts attention to the mundane everyday digital practices of anti-regime Arab

diaspora activists engaging in political and human rights activism, as well as the relief work in their war-torn homelands.

3 Methods

Incorporating the notion of triangulation that entails multiple data sources and diverse data gathering tools (Toma, 2011), the dissertation employs a combination of four qualitative methods and six original data sets to search for meaning, garner participants' experiences and perspectives, and examine the emergence of complexities while exploring context as "a central part of the interpretative process" (Brennen, 2017, p. 22): Qualitative content analysis of news articles, digital ethnography of online diaspora journalists' networks, metajournalistic discourse analysis, and in-depth interviews with journalists, activists, and refugee audiences.

Aiming to inductively explore and identify the advocacy strategies adopted by diaspora journalists in their transnational news reporting on conflict in Syria, the first paper of this dissertation employs a *qualitative content analysis* of a total data set of 100 news articles collected from the digital archives of *Enab Baladi* and *Rozana* Syrian opposition diasporic news websites. The analysis was conducted using Nvivo 12 Pro software.

The first paper of the dissertation also employs *digital ethnography* to examine the activities, posting schedule and agenda, and dynamics of interaction within the two digital advocacy networks created by the Syrian diaspora journalists: *The Syrian Journalists' Association (SJA)* and the *Syrian Female Journalists' Network (SFJN)*. Digital field notes were collected on the Facebook pages of the two networks over a period of four and a half months (from November 1, 2019 to March 21, 2020). Conducting digital observations followed Mare's (2017) seven routines of social media ethnography.

The second paper employs *metajournalistic discourse analysis* to examine the self-descriptions published in the "missions" and "visions" sections on the web-

sites and Facebook pages of three digital networks created by diaspora journalists to examine their roles in promoting professional safety in Syria. Following Carlson's (2016) three aspects of metajournalistic discourse, the analysis focused on examining the implicit and explicit arguments diaspora journalists use to define journalism, legitimize their work, and differentiate the boundaries among the various competing actors in the journalistic scenes.

In total, the dissertation draws upon 94 in-depth interviews (12 with Syrian diaspora journalists and editors, 22 with Arab diaspora activists, and 60 with ordinary non-activist Arab refugees in Switzerland). Their countries of origin are Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Tunisia, Algeria, Yemen, Lebanon, and Libya. Further, the sensitivity of the topic and the vulnerability of the population required meeting in person and building a long-term rapport with the community and individuals to gain their trust. Interviews with journalists and editors were conducted over a seven-month period from December 2019 to June 2020 while interviews with activists and non-activist refugees were conducted over six months from September 2018 to February 2019. The thematic analysis of interview transcripts was conducted with the aid of Nvivo 12 Pro software.

4 Findings

The following section first provides a brief summary of each paper. It then connects the key empirical findings on a higher level of abstraction addressing the dissertation's core research question about how the different Arab diasporic groups interact and collaborate in the diasporic public sphere using various digital platforms to engage in homeland politics.

4.1 Summary of key findings

Paper 1 (Arafat, 2021) addresses the anti-regime Syrian diaspora journalists' engagement in transnational advocacy through news reporting and online advocacy networks. Findings of the content analysis

identified nine content-related advocacy strategies employed by the Syrian diaspora news outlets to promote press freedom and challenge the homeland power authorities. Ethnographic observations further demonstrated that diaspora advocacy journalism poses various challenges to traditional journalism paradigms as journalists use their digital networks to engage in activities previously attributed to political activists such as creating ethical charters, petitioning, releasing solidarity statements, engaging in Hashtag activism, and lobbying the homelands to enact laws.

Paper 2 (Porlezza & Arafat, 2022) moves the discussion forward by examining the role of three online advocacy networks created by Syrian diaspora journalists in promoting news safety and protecting the local journalistic community under threat. The findings demonstrated the engagement of diaspora journalists in various digital practices to serve local reporters and activists in war zones such as providing emergency rescue of journalists under attack, documenting violations and lobbying governments, training local journalists, and developing transnational policies and safety guides. The findings propose four novel digitally-empowered journalistic roles for promoting news safety from exile: *sousveillance*, *defender*, *trainer*, and *regulator / policy developer*.

Paper 3 shifts the focus from diaspora journalists to ordinary non-activist refugees examining the facilitators and barriers that influence and / or shape the online political participation of diasporic non-activist populations. Drawing upon 60 in-depth interviews, the paper advances an innovative model for understanding the *barriers of diasporic online political participation* explaining a new form of democratic divides in the political usage of digital media driven by the digital cross-border repression, a low perceived online political efficacy, and high skepticism in the home and host political systems causing a “double political marginalization.”

Paper 4 (Arafat, 2020) further investigates the different roles of traditional and digital media in fostering the political re-socialization of refugees into the demo-

cratic norms and values of the host country while reinforcing their learning about the homeland politics. Findings demonstrated a significant shift toward building online diasporic communities in private encrypted WhatsApp groups for sharing, producing, and consuming political information to combat digital surveillance and acquire trustworthy information, especially about the homeland conflicts / politics.

Paper 5 shifts attention to the mundane everyday digital practices of anti-regime diaspora activists engaging in transnational political and human rights activism and relief work. Findings pointed to three main challenges that undermine the power of social media to mobilize for a political change post-Arab Spring: the increasing use of “networked repression” technologies by some governments to surveil and target activists, the absence of the host and home countries’ media coverage of the current diaspora’s protests, as well as the individualism created by slacktivism.

4.2 Diasporic interactions, overlapping roles, and digital collaborations

Connecting the key empirical findings on a higher level of abstraction, the dissertation highlights different forms of hybridity and spheres of interaction between the diasporic political actors that can be identified as follows:

4.2.1 Sphere 1 of interaction: Diaspora journalists and activists

Collaborations and interchanging roles: Findings showed that both diaspora activists and journalists perceived themselves as a “voice for the voiceless homeland populations” serving as “watchdogs” who engaged in the bottom-up supervisory roles to reveal the homeland regime’s misconduct. Diaspora journalists empower exiled activist actors by promoting their voices in the news, publishing statistics and reports created by political activist groups, and conferring legitimacy and visibility to their work over others (Carlson, 2011). The empowerment of out-of-authority voices contradicts the traditional sourcing norms in the mainstream media, allowing diaspora journalists to chal-

lenge the “hierarchy of access, monopoly ownership, and exclusion” (Ncube, 2017, p. 94). Simultaneously, activists and human rights defenders, as information providers, indirectly empower and facilitate transnational conflict reporting and news production process by practicing information activism that involves doing research and collecting on-the-ground data about the numbers of murdered and displaced civilians. Using this information enables exiled journalists to promote sympathy, evidence-based accusations, and humanitarian angles of conflict coverage. This collaboration is particularly important in the case of exiled media whose limited financial and human resources and geographical distance make it hard to produce this hard-to-access information by themselves. Findings also showed how diaspora journalists further challenge their normative journalistic roles suggested by scholars through their digital networks on Facebook and introduce a novel set of roles that were previously attached to activists such as petitioning, lobbying the state authorities to release detained reporters, engaging in Hashtag activism, and writing funding proposals to finance their advocacy programs. This suggests a distinctive hybrid conceptualization of journalism that abides by some traditional journalistic norms while integrating additional aspects in line with advocacy groups.

4.2.2 *Sphere 2 of interaction: Diaspora activists and ordinary refugees*

Diasporic protest collaborations: WhatsApp and emails highlight an important digital sphere of interaction between the two groups as it is used by political activists to reach some members of the diasporic community and personalize their protest messages. This creates transnational “networks of resistance” based on trusted communication among personally trusted sources from the diaspora (Castells, 2009, p. 348). However, most of the ordinary refugee participants reported high skepticism in their homeland political regimes and believed their online voice does not have value. Despite having an access to the Internet and smartphones, most of

the informants do not avail themselves of the digital affordances and political opportunities available in the digital space, except for the simple low-risk political information acquisition on Facebook and Twitter and sharing links and news in private WhatsApp and Viber groups. Their perceived low online / offline political efficacy and fear of digital surveillance by the homeland state actors discouraged most of them from engaging in offline protests since they are afraid of being recognized from the photos and live streaming posted online during and after protests. These online and offline self-censorship practices resulted in a new form of democratic divides causing many refugees to be “twice marginalized,” once for not having political rights to participate in the formal state politics offline, and once for not being able to engage freely in digital politics online. This decreasing participation rate of diaspora community members in the offline transnational protesting for homeland-related causes have negatively influenced the diaspora activists’ capability to recruit and mobilize them for protests in Switzerland. This led many activists to abandon political activism in the past few years and shift to relief work hoping to achieve a tangible impact.

4.2.3 *Sphere 3 of interaction: Diaspora journalists and ordinary refugees*

Unexpectedly, the majority of the interviewed Arab refugees in Switzerland did not mention following any diasporic media among their news sources for political information, either from outside or inside Switzerland. They rather reported depending on the interpersonal discussions and filtered news distributed via their online private groups from trusted sources. The flow of political information within these digital platforms highlights important overlapping practices with exile journalists:

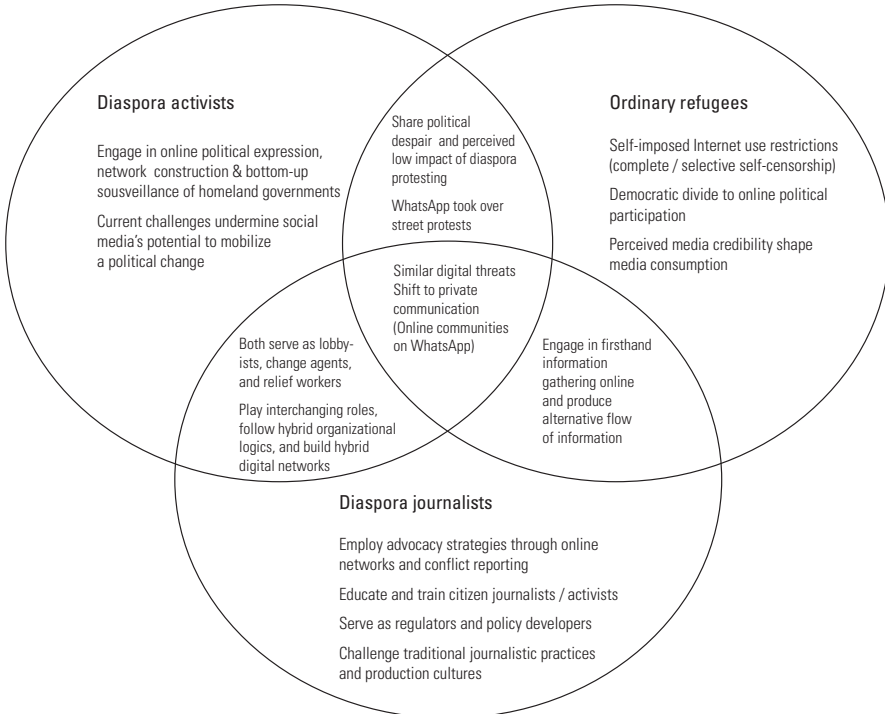
Interchanging roles: To combat the spread of fake news and propaganda on digital platforms, coming mainly from the homeland state-dominated media, findings demonstrated that Arab diasporans used their WhatsApp groups as a means of news generation and tools of

news distribution and verification. Instead of depending on diaspora media that publish information collected from local sources, the ordinary refugees collect this first-hand information on their own using their online social bridges by contacting their friends, family members, and relatives back home to get updates about what’s going on inside the home country and share it with other networks of friends and co-workers in diaspora. To this end, the online diasporic communities on WhatsApp present a new form of alternative media that serve the needs of the diasporic groups and offer a substitution of the traditional ethnic newspapers and community radio channels. This type of user-generated-content highly intersects with the information distributor / disseminator role previously attached to journalists (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018).

4.2.4 Sphere 4 of interaction: Diaspora journalists, activists, and ordinary refugees

To fully understand hybridity, it is important to explain how the digital practices and interactions among the three diasporic groups are influenced by the various political and social factors imposed by the hybrid political systems within which they operate. As findings revealed, the interviewed activists, journalists, and ordinary refugees shared what can be labeled as a *transnational digital culture of fear* in spite of operating physically in less repressive conditions in exile. To this end, the refugees’ concerns about the transnational digital repression expand the political scholars’ arguments about the influence of emotions on online political participation (Weber, 2013; Wollebæk, Karlsen, Steen-Johnsen, & Enjolras, 2019) to the diasporic context where feelings of threat, fear, despair, and mistrust of online friends reflected the participants’ high

Figure 1: Mapping hybridity in the diasporic digital counterpublic sphere



political skepticism of homeland regimes constraining their political engagement in the digital sphere to different levels.

To minimize the homeland-related risks, all the three groups shifted from using Facebook, weblogs, YouTube, and Twitter, that played crucial roles in expressing opinions, mobilizing and documenting the collective political action during the Arab revolts (Khamis, Gold, & Vaughn, 2012), to using “safer” private digital platforms such as secret WhatsApp groups and encrypted emails for daily communication and work organization. While the majority of ordinary refugee participants limited their usage of “semi-public” platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to the non-risky practices of information acquisition and opinion expression about non-political issues, many activists reported using Facebook mainly for communication with the public to inform them about the dates of protests and publish reports. However, Syrian journalists working for online diasporic networks took further measures to not only protect themselves from the digital dangers, but also to promote news safety from exile. By releasing cyber-safety guides on their online networks, offering online and offline training workshops for local and diaspora activists to enhance their digital security skills, and providing emergency rescue for journalists under attack, diaspora journalists serve four novel journalistic roles: *sousveillance*, *defender*, *trainer*, and *regulator/policy developer*. Figure 1 summarizes these connections and distinctions reflecting how the online political practices of diasporic exiles might complement and intersect.

To this end, I propose the following definition of the *hybrid diasporic public sphere*:

The political arena where the different diasporic populations/actors interact and collaborate using various digital platforms to engage in their homeland politics and advocate for transnational social and/or democratic political change. These digitally-empowered interactive collaborations propose new forms of hybridity that blur boundaries between the normative role distinctions of the diasporic

opposition groups introducing novel interchanging and complementary political logics, norms, and practices.

5 Discussion and conclusion

Challenging the repressive political spheres in their authoritarian origin countries, the three Arab diasporic groups used Internet and social media to develop a transnational public sphere to voice their political opinions, exchange information, and advocate for democratic political reforms. This diasporic public sphere is “fragmented” (Bernal, 2005) as it incorporates various online platforms, created by exile opposition actors to serve distinctive purposes, including the online diasporic news websites and advocacy networks established by journalists, the Facebook pages and digital transnational networks created by political and human right activists, as well as the online private diasporic communities where ordinary refugees reported discussing and debating politics and national concerns.

In this hybrid diasporic counterpublic sphere, exiled journalists practice different forms of activism and human rights advocacy oriented toward the homeland while diaspora activists serve as news providers engaging in news generation and distribution. The two opposition groups share mutual goals, support, and protect each other using digital tools that help document and inform the public audiences and international community about the war crimes in their home countries, performing a brokerage role (Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013). While the ordinary non-activist refugees reported being more cautious when contributing to the diasporic digital sphere because they feel unprotected, they played an important role in reinforcing the flow of information within the diasporic sphere by acquiring first-hand information from local sources and disseminating them across their private WhatsApp networks. In this sense, the concept of hybridity is different from how it was previously used to describe a form of “in-between space”, or “third space”

where migrants experience a hybrid culture (Bhabha, 1994, p. 211) or a hybrid public sphere that incorporates interrelationship between face-to-face publics, Internet-based publics and mass-mediated publics (Rasmussen, 2014).

However, it would be naïve to celebrate the democratic potential of the diasporic counterpublic sphere without criticism because, just like the dominant public sphere, it might also exclude others (Ncube, 2017). Within this diasporic digital public sphere, democratic (participation) divides exist not only among diasporic and non-diasporic populations but also among the diasporic groups themselves. Compared to the diaspora journalists and activists, ordinary refugees were the least active political group in the digital sphere. A set of barriers limited their online participation leading them to adopt self-imposed Internet use restrictions that fully or partially censor their online behavior. In this unique diasporic context, the determinants of online political participation of citizens reported in literature (Bosnjak, Galesic, & Klicek, 2008; Chunly, 2019; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Yang & DeHart, 2016) failed to facilitate the digital political participation of Arab refugees which proposed different demands and necessities.

The dissertation findings further provide relevant political and social implications for migration policies and decision making in democratic societies. They reflect the importance of changing the current discourse about refugees' political integration where they are "often seen as passive recipients of humanitarian aid or collective subjects in respect of which measures must be taken, rather than as active political agents" (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 13). Scholars, regulators, and policymakers need to include more bottom-up perspectives in their research by listening to migrants and refugees and closely investigating what drives their online and offline political alienation and what better strategies should be adopted for developing their sense of external political efficacy and trust in the political system. This should come as one of the first steps to en-

courage their integration into democracy and participation in the public discourse. Mainstream media can also play a crucial role in this. Negative portrayals of Muslims in Swiss media do not only lead to stimulating negative attitudes toward Muslim migrants but can also lead to adopting or supporting policies that can harm Muslims, especially when it focuses on wars, conflicts, and clash of civilizations (Ettinger, 2008). While the interviewed Arabs with refugee origins were disappointed by the insufficient and negative reporting of migrants, especially Muslims, in the Swiss and European media, a more balanced portrayal of their reasons for fleeing their home countries and their current adaptation attempts can reinforce a mutual understanding between the migrants and the members of the Swiss host society.

The nature of the research sample posed various limitations to the current study. One of the main challenges was the sensitivity of the political topic it tackles and the vulnerability of the refugee population it studies. Also, reaching a representative sample of Arab refugees in Switzerland was an impossible task. On one side, refugee centers refused to give any contact information of any settled refugees to protect them and no official documents about the exact numbers of current and former Arab refugees in Switzerland were available for public use. On the other, many refugees refused to answer questions about their online political practices. In particular, studying the dynamics of the online discussions and political sharing behavior in the private WhatsApp and Facebook groups of refugees was a challenging task because the participants' high awareness of digital surveillance and online threats thwarted my attempts to get their permission to study their private online groups. Participants refused using their private online discussions for study believing the group content presents sensitive archives of their reactions to several political and social issues and might be used against them by the Swiss or homeland authorities.

While this dissertation addressed many knowledge gaps in the literature, it poin-

ted out many other under-researched areas that require further examination. Future researchers should consider examining the online diaspora journalists' network construction in other conflict contexts to investigate the various advocacy / activism roles they serve in other countries with different political and social contexts. Further research might also need to pay more focus to comparing the state-funded and the donor-funded journalistic business models employed by the diasporic media outlets to examine how the funding strategy influences the advocacy agenda building and editorial decisions within their newsrooms and how journalists deal with the economic sustainability threats that each of these business models might pose. While the current research focused on the digital political participation of the first generation Arab refugees in Switzerland and the self-imposed Internet use restrictions they adopt to minimize the digital risks, examining the online political behavior of the second generation of Arabs with refugee parents and the factors that facilitate or hamper their political engagement highlights an interesting area for further investigation.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank the 2022 SACM dissertation prize committee for the honor of receiving this award. Also, I would like to deeply thank my main supervisor Prof. Jolanta Drzewiecka and co-supervisor Prof. Stephan Russ-Mohl for supporting, comforting, and helping me throughout the PhD journey. I am also very grateful to the Swiss Government Excellence Scholarships (ESKAS) for funding my PhD studies in Switzerland and for the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) for funding my postdoctoral mobility fellowship at City, University of London in the United Kingdom.

Conflict of interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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