Commenting in the Online Arab Public Sphere: Debating the Swiss Minaret Ban and the "Ground Zero Mosque" Online

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This article focuses on the emerging online Arab public sphere that the web has enabled. It explores how the "local" interacts with the "global," critically examining their implications on global politics. Specifically looking at online readers' comments about the Swiss minaret ban the so-called "Ground Zero Mosque," how does the Arab online public sphere respond to and frame these issues? What implications do these reader frames portend locally and globally? The study analyzes online comments and responses that readers of Al Arabiya.net and Al Jazeera.net posted on related news articles. The article concludes that the new online public sphere does make it possible for Arab citizens to circumvent and challenge traditional authoritarian controls.

Key words: Arab public sphere, online comments, globalization, framing, anti-Americanism, Arab news, Islam

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The seismic mass protests that toppled Arab dictators in Egypt and Tunisia in 2011 drew the world's attention not only to how Arab societies were evolving but also to communication technologies' contribution to this evolution. The explosion of discussion boards and reader comment functions on Arab news websites has engaged a large number of previously excluded Arab citizens in public discourse (e.g. Hofheinz, 2005; Al-Saggaf, 2006; Abdulla, 2007; Seib, 2007; Warf & Vincent, 2007; Bunt, 2009). This article focuses on the emerging online Arab public sphere that the web has enabled. How does this online public sphere deal with global politics, particularly regarding issues pertinent to Muslims and Islam? This question assumes extraordinary importance in light of the global political climate following the 9/11 attacks. During this tumultuous period, Arab and Muslim publics have had to come to terms with the stark reality of fellow Muslims perpetrating terrorist attacks with enormous human cost in New York City, London, Madrid, Casablanca, and Bali. In their living rooms, they have lived with daily pictures of armed conflict and mayhem coming out of Afghanistan and Iraq. The same publics became part of global media "spectacle" in violently reacting to the Danish cartoons' portrayal of their prophet in 2005. Similar events fuelling the public debate in the Arab and Muslim worlds have included: the Abu Ghraib prison scandal in 2004; the murder of Theo Van Gogh (a Dutch politician’s) film, Fitna, in 2008; and Switzerland’s ban on the construction of minarets in 2009. In the summer of 2010, the online Arab public sphere was abuzz with
another media circus following two controversies in the US, a Florida pastor’s Koran burning threat, and an emotional debate surrounding a proposed Islamic center two blocks away from New York City’s “Ground Zero” (Blumenthal & Mowjood, 2009).

That domestic policy decisions have serious global repercussions has become an entrenched fact of today’s media-saturated political environment. As the cases above illustrate, political debates and controversies have become globalized. Furthermore, these events share a challenge to traditional boundaries imposed by geographic limitations on the relationship between the cultural and political worlds, the local and the global. Local popular cultures have become embroiled in debates among geographically dispersed, global audiences, endlessly facilitated by the possibilities of the global means of communications. The promise of “new” media in mobilizing “inactive” and/or oppressed citizens necessarily means bringing new voices to the (global) public sphere, ushering in an “online public sphere” (Downey & Fenton, 2003; Poor, 2005; Dahlberg, 2007).

The online public sphere in the Arab world is more globalized than the discursive spaces in traditional fora, particularly when global news and events have local resonance. In focusing on these issues in the Arab “online public sphere,” this article explores how the “local” interacts with the “global,” critically examining their implications on global politics. Specifically looking at online readers’ comments about the Swiss minaret ban and the so-called “Ground Zero Mosque,” how does the Arab online public sphere respond to and frame these issues? What implications do these reader frames portend locally and globally? The study analyzes online comments and responses that readers of Al Arabiya.net and Al Jazeera.net posted on related news articles. These two websites belong to two popular pan-Arab satellite television stations, Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera television news channels, respectively. While the above questions suggest some entry points to examining how the local interacts with the global in popular culture and international politics, they also provide an opportunity to scrutinize the online public spheres’ potential to circumvent and challenge traditional authoritarian controls.

Is there an Online Arab Public Sphere?

The convergence of new media and Habermas’ conceptualization of the public sphere are strongly embedded in the above question. Generally, various scholars have viewed the proliferation of interactive news sites, user generated content (UGC), and social media’s ascendancy as facilitating democratic deliberation and discourse in society (e.g. Rheingold, 2002). As more users converge to debate issues of local and global concern, challenging the top-down flow of information, they are effectively extending and invigorating the public sphere (Downey & Fenton, 2003). According to Habermas (1962/1989), the public sphere refers to the arena, independent of government, where public opinion is formed through open and unfiltered discussion, as well as public’s unfettered access to information. A communicative infrastructure, the public sphere is “made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state” (p. 176). Articulating the democratic and deliberative implications of the concept, McKee (2005) states that the public sphere “attempts to describe the way in which millions of citizens reach consensus about the running of their society” (p.6). The communicative infrastructure and deliberative, democratic potential aspects merge the public sphere and the web, empowering citizens and civil society at large.

The “online public sphere” refers to that convergence, empowered and participatory citizen culture harnessing the power of the web. Drawing on Habermas’s original concept and the interactive nature of the web, Poor (2005) describes the online public sphere as an “often mediated,” discursive space that attracts “new, previously excluded, discussants” (n.p.). Within this discursive space, political issues dominate the debate agenda. And, finally, “ideas are judged by their merit, not by the standing of the speaker” (n.p.). These four criteria provide a useful framework to examine both the limitations and
possibilities implied in the concept of the online public sphere. Still, similar to debates surrounding the original public sphere concept itself, questions swirl about whether these criteria can be universally applicable across cultures and societies? And how useful would it be to talk about an online public sphere in the Arab world?

As other researchers have observed, applying Habermas’s “public sphere” concept to how public opinion gets formed and shaped in the Arab world is a “contentious” and difficult enterprise (Lynch, 2006; Zayani, 2008). The primary challenges leveled at Habermas’ “public sphere” lie in how the concept overlooks issues of access and mediation. Habermas’ idealization of the 18th century European bourgeois sphere as an open space for rational deliberation and discussion ignores the fact that participation was limited to the privileged, and thus excluded many marginalized groups in society (Kellner, 2000). Other critics have remarked that women, working class, and plebeian members of society were barred from the bourgeois public sphere (Calhoun, 1992; Ryan, 1992). Fraser (1990) has documented how these marginalized voices, particularly women, formed their own public spheres to represent the interests of those excluded voices (Fraser, 1990). A second problematic issue in Habermas’s conceptualization of the public sphere is the problem of “mediation.” That is, the public sphere as an independent arena has relied on the mass media to provide an open forum for the exchange of ideas and formulation of public opinion. Government or concentrated corporate ownership of the mass media leaves little room for the public to participate. The mass media become a reflection of the opinion of the business and political elites instead of genuinely reflecting public opinion (McChesney, 1999). Scholars acknowledge that Habermas does argue that the structural transformation of the public sphere, and the dominance of corporate ownership and government control, have led to a “refeudalization” of the public sphere, which stifled debate and decreased its autonomy from the state. These legitimate critical concerns have encouraged some scholars to speak of multiple “public spheres,” and some have even theorized “alternative” or “counter-publics” existing outside the officially sanctioned spaces of debate (Fraser, 1990).

An open and decentralized system of communication, the Internet has held the promise of enabling a vigorous public debate that resolves the above contradictions associated with Habermas’ conceptualization (Dahlberg, 2001; Poster, 2001; Papacharissi, 2002). To some extent, the Internet has enfranchised previously marginalized groups, which levelled the playing field in terms of access. Blogs, online forums, and other user-generated media have practically threatened established interests’ grip and domination of public opinion. However, some scholars remained sceptics for a variety of reasons. Dahlberg (2001) summed up the sceptics’ arguments in stressing that the Internet’s potential to create a vibrant public sphere is limited because:

- the increasing colonization of cyberspace by state and corporate interests, a deficit of reflexivity, a lack of respectful listening to others, the difficulty of verifying identity claims and information put forward, the exclusion of many from online political fora, and the domination of discourse by certain individuals and groups (n.p.).

Instead of empowering the populace, the Internet would entrench the interests of the elite, this critique posits. In *The myth of digital democracy*, Hindman (2008) also made similar arguments by observing that influential American bloggers represent the elite, and come from privileged socio-economic backgrounds.

Several developments may have challenged these lines of criticism. First, user-generated media, social networking, and Web 2.0 have empowered vast numbers of users and citizens. Second, in authoritarian and repressive states, the Internet have provided mediated fora and alternative spaces free from state control (Lynch, 2007). Third, anonymity does not necessarily lead to irresponsibility
and disrespect because in authoritarian states it offers safety and refuge from state repression. As the 2011 massive democratic shifts in the Middle East have amply illustrated, anonymity allows for the evasion of state power and repression, and made offline mobilization more effective. In fact, anonymity of online communities can have a positive outcome, and it may encourage people to help each other (Wellman & Gulia, 1999). Finally, in the absence of fair and objective means of assessing public opinion in authoritarian societies, online comments offer online spaces for the formation of public opinion (Al-Saggaf, 2006). While most Internet users in the region are young and educated, Internet access has exceeded 20% of the population in Egypt and more than 30% in Tunisia, and Internet users’ number has skyrocketed (according to data from Internet Stats and United Nations’ human development reports). In the Arab world, YouTube and social media have grown more popular, and gained more legitimacy because they are perceived to be autonomous from their authoritarian states, unlike the mass media landscape.

Further, the world of “new” media, combined with the ascendancy of transnational satellite televisions, is stirring the socio-political landscape in the Arab world. Young activists have used the Internet to wage global campaigns for freedom of speech, as illustrated in the campaign to free Kareem, a jailed Egyptian blogger (Lynch, 2007). The case of Arab bloggers who publicize the abuses of Arab governments, transforming the web into a vehicle for political dissent and popular protest, indicate a fledgling, but vibrant online public sphere (Douai, 2009; Lynch, 2007), regardless of “social particularity” (Zayani, 2008). The online public sphere, such as readers’ online comments on news stories, can even challenge the power of traditional mass media, as Al-Saggaf (2006) illustrates. Arab readers used the comment functions to offer their own versions of the “truth” about the war against Iraq that countered the news reports of Al-Arabiya (Al-Saggaf, 2006). In the same study, Al-Saggaf concluded that the online Arab public sphere does very much satisfy the criteria stipulated by Poor (2005).

User comments on news sites illustrate both the interactivity and USG features of the web, on the one hand, and the promises associated with an open and accessible “public sphere,” on the other. In offering these commenting features, online news sources empower readers in several ways (e.g. Abdulla, 2007; Thurman, 2008). Online users’ comments facilitate interaction with readers of the same news story, discussion of news content, venting frustrations, and/or airing agreements to a larger public. Comments benefit from the anonymity of the web which offers a safe haven from the “watchful eye” of the state, encouraging more honest expression of opinions. Studying these comments becomes one way of gauging the pulse of the public debate (Lange, 2008). Finally, this study focuses on user comments on news sites because these comments offer a unique perspective on how geographically dispersed audiences globalize local issues.

The Global and the Local in the “Swiss Minaret Ban” and the “Ground Zero Mosque” Controversies

With the rise of global communications, domestic politics has become a global affair with immediate repercussions, as Switzerland’s decision to ban construction of minarets, and the US administration’s grappling with publicized opposition to the so-called “Ground Zero Mosque” show. On 29 November, 2009, Swiss citizens voted to outlaw construction of minarets in Switzerland. Within European politics, the Swiss decision was construed along partisan lines and narratives. While the conservative right in Switzerland and other European countries hailed the voters’ decision as emblematic of “a genuine fear over Islam on the continent,” moderates and liberals condemned the decision as “stigmatizing European Muslims” (Bremmer, 2009). Four months later, the UN condemnation of the Swiss decision showed the high stakes and raw emotions globally associated with that vote (Swiss Info, 2010).
Table 1: Number of news articles and comments posted on Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya websites included in the analysis*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Website</th>
<th>Number of News Articles</th>
<th>Number of Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Swiss Minaret Ban</td>
<td>Al Arabiya.net</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Al Jazeera.net</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Ground Zero” Mosque</td>
<td>Al Arabiya.net</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>2337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Al Jazeera.net</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>577</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Al Arabiya.net &amp; Al Jazeera.net</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>4539</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Website search was conducted between September 15 and October 5, 2010.

Similar high stakes became evident after New York City’s Council approved a project for an Islamic community center to be located two blocks away from the site of 9/11 terrorist attacks in December 2009. Dubbed the Cordoba House, the planned center hoped to expand “interfaith dialogue,” according to the people behind the initiative (Blumenthal & Mowjood, 2009). It was only in the summer of 2010, and as U.S. midterm elections drew closer, that U.S. conservatives and politicians rallied against the planned center. Calling it a desecration of a “hallowed” ground and callously “insensitive,” opposition to the mosque became fierce and generated a lot of media coverage globally. New York City’s Mayor Michael Bloomberg came out publicly in support of the project, and, after some time, U.S. President Barack Obama openly supported the project, emphasizing the constitutional rights guaranteed to all U.S. citizens, including Muslims.

Strictly speaking, these two controversies had much to do with domestic politics, the tussle between the conservative right and the Democrats in U.S. 2010 midterm elections, or the threat of a xenophobic right in Europe. While taking place in different continents, and in different years, both stories became media “events” (Dayan & Katz, 1992), and gained wide global media coverage because of the tensions and the repercussions they had evoked. Because they deal with the issue of Islam in the west, public attention to these “distant” incidents was significant in Arab and Muslim media outlets. For instance, Al Jazeera’s website devoted more than 20 news stories to the “Swiss Minaret Ban,” and the controversy swirling around the so-called “Ground Zero Mosque.” Similarly, Al Arabiya’s website had 29 and 33 online news articles (see Table 1). The fact that some opportunist and populist leaders, like Libya’s Muammar al-Gaddafi, called on Arab governments to boycott Switzerland only fuelled the media’s insatiable appetite.

Research Questions

This review articulated a need for examining how and whether globalization and web-based media have contributed to the formation of an online public sphere in Arabic-speaking societies. The above considerations constitute enough grounds to justify choosing the Swiss minaret ban and the so-called “Ground Zero Mosque” controversies to examine how global audiences debate politics. Debating these “globalized” incidents on the web would help chart some interesting and important linkages between the local and the global in international politics. As online news outlets provide a new forum for public debate and deliberation, they have become central to shaping public opinion. The online Arab public sphere becomes a good site to examine these issues. Al-Saggaf (2006) focused exclusively on Al Arabiya.net and how its readers’ comments on stories related to the war on Iraq provided an alternative construction of the war. The present study extends the focus to include other news websites.
by comparing online comments from Al Jazeera.net and Al Arabiya.net. The popularity and divergent editorial lines of these outlets are behind the researchers’ decision to select these pan Arab media as a case study. While accusations of anti-Americanism are often hurled at the Qatari-based Al Jazeera, the UAE-based Al Arabiya is often described as pro-Saudi and American interests. Outlining the similarities and differences between readers of different news outlets, the comparison provides a more diverse snapshot of the Arab online public sphere. Based on this rationale, the article will answer the following research question:

RQ 1. How did Arab readers respond to the Swiss Minaret ban and the so-called “Ground Zero Mosque” issues? Specifically, are there any differences between Al Jazeera’s and Al Arabiya’s reader comments in the way they responded to the two events?

With this question, the analysis will assess levels of “support” and “opposition” that readers’ comments express about the “minaret ban” and the so-called “Ground Zero Mosque.” “Support” in the case of the Swiss minaret was coded as meaning agreement with the government’s ban, while “support” in the so-called Ground Zero mosque means agreeing with the Islamic center’s proposed location. Moreover, online responses on Al Arabiya.net are compared with those found on Al Jazeera.net.

Beyond levels of readers’ support and opposition, the researchers provide a textually grounded analysis of these online comments. The second phase of the research qualitatively assesses the way online comments “frame” these incidents. Exclusive focus will be on users’ comments found on Al Jazeera.net stories because this site is the more prominent of the two. The second research question is:

RQ 2. How do these online comments frame the two events, particularly among Al Jazeera.net readers?

The study will answer RQ 2 by providing a close examination of comments responding to two news articles on Al Jazeera.net. The first article (published on 11/29/2009) deals with the Swiss decision to ban the construction of minarets on which readers posted 87 comments. The second article deals with Obama’s support of the planned mosque (published on 08/15/2010), which garnered 64 online comments. The implications of the frames emerging from the online Arab public sphere will be discussed.

Method

This article reports the results of quantitative and qualitative analyses of N = 4539 online comments on news articles posted on the websites of Al Jazeera television (http://aljazeera.net) and Al Arabiya television (http://www.alarabiya.net). The 105 news articles chosen here were selected from a pool of news stories discussing two events that took place outside the Arab world, the “Swiss Minaret Ban” in 2005 and New York City’s so-called “Ground Zero Mosque” in 2010. In addition to illustrating the connection between domestic policies and global audiences, these controversies were chosen because they had gained a lot of Arab media attention (see Table 1).

Data retrieval, compilation, and selection went through several phases. In phase I, the researchers conducted a preliminary search of the above websites. Using the following phrases, “Swiss minaret ban” and the so-called “Ground Zero Mosque” as search terms on both websites, the search yielded a large number of stories. After examination of the retrieved data, articles unrelated to the events were removed from the story pool. Each article was checked carefully for relevance, and additional related articles were added from the websites’ “Related Topics” hyperlinks. In the final count, Al Jazeera’s website yielded 20 articles about the so-called “Ground Zero Mosque” controversy (published between 12/20/2009 and 09/26/2010); 23 news articles about the “Swiss Minaret Ban” (published between 14/08/2009 and
Table 2 The two articles and comments selected from Al Jazeera.net

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Date posted</th>
<th>No. of comments</th>
<th>Link</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

12/23/2009). As summarized in Table 2, Al Arabiya’s website yielded 29 and 33 news articles related to the so-called “Ground Zero Mosque” (published between 7/28/2010 and 9/27/2010), and the “Swiss Minaret Ban” (published between 9/5/2008 and 12/26/2009), respectively.

Phase II of data collection involved looking at all the comments posted on the selected articles. Al Jazeera users and readers posted N = 577 comments in response to the mosque stories, and N = 1270 comments on the Swiss minaret issue (see Table II). Al Arabiya users posted N = 355 comments in response to the mosque news articles, and N = 2337 comments on the Swiss minaret issue. This phase provides a look at the coverage’s “breadth;” it seeks answers to RQ1 on how Arab readers responded to the Swiss minaret ban and the “Ground Zero Mosque” issues. Describing the levels of support and opposition to these decisions is instrumental to understanding larger trends as well as comparing comments posted on Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya sites.

The researchers coded these N = 4539 comments as either in “support,” “opposition,” or “neutral.” Regarding the Swiss minaret ban, any comments that clearly supported the Swiss government’s decision to ban the construction of minarets were coded as “support;” comments that clearly objected to the ban were coded as “opposed;” whereas comments that failed to articulate clearly one of the earlier positions were coded as “neutral.” Regarding the controversy surrounding the planned “Ground Zero Mosque,” all comments coded as “support” clearly agreed with the proposed location of the so-called “Ground Zero Mosque,” two blocks from the site of 9/11 attacks, and/or argued for its constitutionality. On the other hand, any comments that clearly called for moving the mosque far from its proposed/original location, or considered the project inappropriate, insensitive or harmful to Muslims and Muslim/US relations, were considered as “opposed.” In some cases, few comments expressed both “support” and “opposition” in the same post, and those were coded as “neutral.” In those instances, the researchers had to discuss the comments and reach a mutual decision. As both researchers are native Arabic speakers, they conducted the coding and analysis of comments themselves. They also translated other relevant comments included and/or quoted in the study.

To understand the tapestry of reader comments, the third phase of data collection subjected “representative” and specific examples of the collected comments’ and articles to further analysis. The selection criteria included the number of comments an article received and how important the article was in the whole coverage. One prominent article about the Swiss minaret ban and another on the so-called “Ground Zero Mosque” controversy were selected. Both articles had the largest number of comments and were selected from Al Jazeera’s compiled data for close analysis. In addition to the “most
Results

The first research question gauges levels of support and opposition to the Swiss minaret ban and the so-called “Ground Zero Mosque” project among readers of Al Arabiya.net and Al Jazeera.net:

RQ 1. How did Arab readers respond to the “Swiss Minaret ban” and the “Ground Zero Mosque” issues? Specifically, are there any differences between Al Jazeera’s and Al Arabiya’s reader comments in the way they responded to the two events?

Table 3 organizes readers’ from each website as supporting, opposing, or neutral (see method section above). An important caveat needs to be reiterated. On the Swiss minaret ban issue, comments that concurred with the Swiss government’s decision to ban construction of minarets were considered to be in support of that decision. On the so-called “Ground Zero Mosque” issue, comments that were clearly critical of the project, or merely objected to its proposed location, were considered to be in opposition.

On the Swiss minaret issue, Al Arabiya’s readers were almost evenly divided as 43% (N = 154) of the comments opposed the Swiss government’s ban while 33% (N = 117) were clearly in support of such a decision. A good section of Al Arabiya’s readers, 24% (N = 84) of the comments, were “neutral,” i.e. they did not articulate a single position regarding the ban on constructing minarets in Switzerland. By contrast, a larger majority of Al Jazeera readers’ comments, 56% (N = 715) clearly supported the minaret ban, 20% (N = 248) opposed the ban, and 24% (N = 307) were neutral (see Table 3).

The quantitative analysis yields a similar set of results in readers’ comments on news articles about the “Ground Zero Mosque” issue. While similarly divided, a majority of Al Arabiya readers’ comments, 39% (N = 902) of the responses, supported the planned mosque in New York City; 35% (N = 818) opposed the idea; and 26% (N = 617) of the comments were found to be neutral. By contrast, a significantly larger majority of Al Jazeera readers’ comments supported the planned mosque with 59%...
Figure 1 Reader’s responses to the Swiss minaret ban

Figure 2 Reader’s responses to the so-called “Ground Zero Mosque”

(N = 342); while opposition to the planned mosque was almost equal to neutral comments with 20% (N = 117) and 21% (N = 118), respectively (see Table 4).

As Figures 1 and 2 visually illustrate, more comments on Al Jazeera.net are in support of the Swiss minaret ban than on Al Arabiya.net, with 56% (N = 715) and 33% (N = 117), respectively. Also, more comments on Al Jazeera.net are in support of the proposed mosque than on Al Arabiya.net, with 59% (N = 342) and 39% (N = 902), respectively.
RQ 2. How do these online comments frame the two events, particularly among Al Jazeera.net readers?

The second research question’s goal is to conduct a qualitative investigation of the online Arab public sphere. To probe the comments on the two issues, the researchers selected two articles from the “sampling frame,” each representing a “pivotal” moment in the Swiss minaret ban and the so-called “Ground Zero Mosque” coverage among Al Jazeera.net readers (Table III). Rather than being opinionated pieces, the selected articles happened to be composed by two international news agencies, Agence France-Presse and Reuters. How readers’ comments frame the two issues is worth investigating because these reader frames may not necessarily correspond to the media text the comments respond to. These frames provide an online pulse of the predominant interpretation and perceptions of these two events in the online Arab public sphere. Moreover, as Entman (1993) emphasizes,

Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described (p. 52).

In analyzing how readers’ comments framed the two events, the study examined which aspects were “salient,” as well as how these comments “defined” and interpreted the problem/controversies. If they suggest any “remedies” or “solutions,” those remedies are discussed.

The qualitative analysis of Al Jazeera.net readers yielded findings that sometimes differed from the previous section’s quantitative analysis. Unlike the quantitative assessment in RQ 1, a majority of the comments on “Disappointment at Swiss Minaret Ban” (Al Jazeera.net, 2009) opposes the Swiss decision with 62.06% (N = 87). A close analysis of the comments reveals that a majority of comments framed the Swiss minaret ban as part of a concerted campaign to attack Islam, “Islam under attack” frame. Comments cite several reasons that bolster this “Islam under attack” frame. So, how was this frame constructed?

In responding to the Swiss minaret ban and to the so-called “Ground Zero Mosque,” the overarching frame of “Islam under attack” emerges out of Al Jazeera readers’ comments. The comments’ construction of this overarching frame is based on defining both events as motivated by deep fears of Islam, leading to discrimination against Muslims. Further, the overarching frame highlights the anachronism and contradictions engendered by both debates. On the one hand, the west (Switzerland and the US, specifically) prides itself for being a bastion of religious freedom and tolerance. On the other hand, according to this frame, the controversies betray a lack of tolerance and discrimination toward Muslims’ religious freedom.

The unconstitutionality of the Swiss government’s decision to ban minarets gains much salience in Al Jazeera readers’ comments. The Swiss minaret ban is framed as an attack on (Swiss) Muslims, curtailing their religious freedom, and violating constitutional rights. The decision was perceived to hurt Switzerland’s democratic and secular values. The problem with banning minarets, according to many comments, is its flagrant violation of the Swiss constitution’s own guarantees of religious freedoms. Flaunting these constitutional traditions demonstrates how anti-Islam, discriminatory sentiments motivated the ban on constructing minarets in Switzerland. For many of these readers, the ban fits in a historical context where freedom of religion is mere veneer across Europe as well. The “Free Brother from Amman,” a reader from Amman, Jordan, sums up this attitude in his post:

Switzerland has the right to do whatever she likes. But this decision proves that democracy and freedom of expression are not respected. Otherwise, why modify the constitution? Britain
volunteered and jailed suspected Muslims without trial for 45 days. France banned the veil. Switzerland is following suit. If this is not demolishing their professed freedom of religion, what would it be? Freedom of religion in Europe has not lasted more than 70 years in their bloody history.

Wielding these arguments, comments effectively base their opposition to the Swiss ban on its unconstitutionality, and how its discriminatory implications are part of a concerted attack on Islam.

President Obama’s public support for Muslims’ right to build the planned Islamic center in New York City undercut the “constitutional” argument, however. Instead, Al Jazeera readers’ comments focus on how Muslims’ religious freedom is being curtailed in an anti-Muslim wave. Comments construed the planned NYC Islamic center controversy as a larger problem for American Muslims, particularly their freedom of religion and other Islamic practices. For many, the controversy is emblematic of the growing sense of prejudice and discrimination against U.S. Muslims. They warned that it might have adverse effects on young Muslims in the US who would be easy prey to extremism. Even the skeptics who opposed the planned mosque cited this atmosphere of discrimination and the fact that the project’s proximity to “Ground Zero” site may adversely serve to remind and associate Islam with terrorism in the minds of most Americans. One comment posted by a reader, whose user name was simply “Muslim American,” represented this trend:

The decision to build the mosque is an unwise step whose purpose is fuel anti-Muslim sentiments in the US. It will show Muslims as insensitive to the victims of September (11, 2001). It was possible to build this project anywhere in the US but Ground Zero. Our right to defend Al Aqsa mosque is similar to their right to oppose the construction of a center in a site where many innocents died because of extremist terrorists. The construction of the center in this site would be a terrible mistake whose purpose is to increase animosity against Muslims.

Even Obama’s professed support was suspected of fuelling the animosity against Muslims, according to some comments.

While constitutional rights and religious freedom are certainly salient in the construction of the “Islam under attack” frame, the proposed solutions are contradictory. The “Islam under attack” framing calls for a firm response from Arab governments. In response to the Swiss ban on the construction of minarets, many comments called for an economic boycott of Switzerland, specifically mentioning the withdrawal of Arab financial investments from the country. The words of a reader from Morocco, who identified herself as “Huda,” sums up these calls:

I wish Arabs would withdraw their billions of dollars that enrich the Swiss and their banks. It is evident today that [the Swiss are not showing] any respect for Arabs’ and Muslims’ religious feelings. They care only for Arabs’ money. O’ Muslims, until when are you going to support this infinite humiliation?

The call for an official and vigorous response to Switzerland’s decision was peppered with comments expressing outright frustration at Arab governments’ perceived inaction. In contrast, readers’ comments did not call for a similar vigorous reaction to the so-called “Ground Zero Mosque” controversy. The absence of such reaction/solution may be due to the fact that an official response was unwarranted in the mosque controversy given that Obama’s support for the project rendered such calls moot. Instead, most comments focused on the negative implications of the project on U.S.-Muslim relations.
Discussion

Whether at Fox News, CNN, or Al Jazeera Television, global media reports have indirectly homogenized, and sometimes demonized Arab public opinion, particularly its response to global political events, in a fashion customary of Hollywood (Said, 1981; Shaheen, 2001). Findings from this study suggest that diverse views suffuse Arab public opinion particularly online. Online comments on Al Arabiya.net regarding the Swiss minaret ban and the so-called “Ground Zero Mosque” controversies differ from responses found on Al Jazeera.net in significant ways. First, opposition to the Swiss ban on the construction of minarets is more likely to be found among users of Al Arabiya.net (43%; N = 154) than those of Al Jazeera.net (20%; N = 248). Further, a majority of Al Jazeera.net’s responses (56%; N = 715) supported the ban. To comprehend how counter-intuitive such findings are, it is important to keep in mind that Al Jazeera Television has built its reputation as an advocate of pan-Arab and Muslim issues (el-Nawawy & Iskandar, 2002). One way of explaining this discrepancy between reader comments and Al Jazeera’s reputation is that readers may not fully share the news outlet’s perspective on the event. They have amply voiced their disagreement in supporting the Swiss minaret ban (56%; N = 715). While Al Arabiya.net may indeed be more “moderate” than Al Jazeera.net, its readers’ opposition to the ban is more vocal.

A closer, qualitative investigation of Al Jazeera users’ comments that supported the Swiss minaret ban reveals three dominant positions. First, some comments explicitly point to “hypocrisy” implied in the outrage expressed at the ban. As “The Free One from Amman” user puts it:

Why should we blame Switzerland? Why is church construction not permitted in Saudi Arabia? In Egypt, a presidential decree is required (for the construction of a church)! Why this endless hypocrisy to such a lowly degree? We are astounded the world does not respect us!

Double standards and lack of religious freedom in Arab and Muslim nations are arguments frequently mentioned in supporting the ban. The second dominant position can be labelled a “religious rationale” that avoids equating minarets with Islam and its teachings. This position argues that minarets do not reflect inner and religious beliefs since God can be worshipped anywhere. Proponents of this position sometimes get technical, but as “Abderahman Saiidy from Cairo” user explains:

The presence or absence of minarets is not proof, or even an indication to be considered in gauging the strength of a Muslim community’s beliefs or faith. . . The most important presence is that of strong beliefs and faith in the heart, and, consequently, in daily practices and behaviour. . .

The religious grounds backing the Swiss minaret ban complement a third dominant rationale focused on the integration of Muslim migrants in their western societies. Muslims’ integration in the West means abiding by their democratic choices and decisions. In his post entitled “The truth must be told,” the “Bashar from Germany” user starkly states this position: “Europeans have all the right to prevent the Islamization of their countries.” Being complementary, these three trends in Al Jazeera users’ comments represent the dominant rationales used in supporting the Swiss decision.

The quantitative analysis of reader comments underscores differences among readers/users of different news websites. Similar discrepancies take place in readers’ comments about the so-called “Ground Zero Mosque” issue hotly contested in the summer of 2010. Majorities in both Al Arabiya.net and Al Jazeera.net supported the planned Islamic center project in New York City. Upon close examination, Al Jazeera.net readers are more likely to support the project (59%; N = 342) compared
to Al Arabiya.net’s readers (39%; N = 902). Interestingly, opposition to the mosque was more vocal among Al Arabiya.net readers (35%; N = 818) than Al Jazeera.net’s (20%; N = 117). Overall, one consistent trend among user comments regarding both the Swiss ban and the planned mosque issues: readers of Al Arabiya.net appear to be evenly divided and torn, whereas Al Jazeera.net’s readers appear less polarized. While the study does not make any claims about the content of these websites, reader polarization may be due to the media coverage’s tenor and quality in each website. A large body of research from uses and gratifications on active audiences supports the above observation. Ideological affinity and self-selection have explained audience’s media exposure as self-selection, and avoiding cognitive dissonance underpin audience predispositions (e.g. Ruggiero, 2000).

Qualitative analysis reiterates this polarization among readers of Al Jazeera.net. Be it the Swiss minaret ban or the location of the planned Islamic center in New York City, Al Jazeera.net readers frame both controversies as part of “Islam under attack” frame. Several interpretations can explain the dominance of this frame. This rhetorical strategy allows readers of Al Jazeera.net to construe these controversies within the larger global political context of post 9/11, including the U.S. military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. More importantly, it constructs an imagined nation and global community of Islam, the Umma. Whether Muslims live in Switzerland or the US, they are still part of the Umma, which is an implied contention of transnational, Islamist discourse (el-Nawawy & Khamis, 2009). On the basis of this logic, the rhetorical frame of “Islam under attack” serves to voice opposition to the perceived injustice and indignities that the Umma has suffered. As many comments explicitly confirm, this frame indicts Arab governments for their supposed “impotence” and silence regarding these indignities.

To a great extent, these research findings indicate that online commenting functions on news media websites provide an alternative space for the formulation and expression of Arab public opinion. Poor (2005)’s taxonomy of the “online public sphere” very usefully describes how commenting constitutes part of a fledgling, yet very vibrant, online public sphere in the Arab world. Similar to other online fora, the spaces online commenting functions offer are highly mediated and they empower new discussants. Under authoritarian regimes, taking part in “public arguments” may come at a high cost (Lynch, 2006). Arab authoritarianism has been able to infiltrate and disrupt the flow of communication in society, which eventually stifled civil society and public debate. The Internet has encouraged many young people and other repressed social groups to participate in the public dialogue (Hofheinz, 2005). Granted that these new entrants need to be computer literate, the Internet has provided a more inclusive space, compared to traditional media.

The findings provide evidence that online users’ framing of the two events diverge from the official stances of Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya television channels. Such divergence demonstrates the strength, autonomy and vibrancy of the online public sphere. This burgeoning sphere, which includes other types of computer mediated communication (CMC) such as discussion boards, online news sites, and other online fora, inverts the traditional means of communication. Instead of one way communication that Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya television shows offer, the commenting pages offer the many-to-many exchange of information. Rheingold (2004) explains that this Internet architecture inverts the traditional paradigm of information gathering and dissemination associated with traditional journalism. He argues:

Structurally, the Internet has inverted the few-to-many architecture of the broadcast age, in which a small number of people were able to influence and shape the perceptions and beliefs of entire nations. In the many-to-many environment of the Net, every desktop is a printing press, a broadcasting station, and a place of assembly. Mass media will continue to exist and so will journalism, but these institutions will no longer monopolize attention and access to the attention of others (p. 272).
This inversion breaks up the traditional hierarchies predominant in the existing social order. More significantly, it allows for a genuinely democratic public sphere in which “ideas are judged by their merit, not by the standing of the speaker” (Poor, 2005; n.p.; Habermas, 1962/1989). Judging from the tenor of the debate, and, as far as the researchers can judge, the websites studied permit all sorts of comments.

Previously marginalized groups, such as Arabic speaking expatriates living in the West and elsewhere, actively contribute to the expansion and globalization of the online public sphere. Habermas’ original conceptualization did not account for the forces of globalization, and narrowly confined the public sphere to national boundaries (Habermas, 1962/1989). The current study discovered that many online comments come from users residing outside the traditional confines of Arab nations. Some caveats are warranted, however. For academic researchers, it is almost impossible to ascertain the identity or the location of the discussants who pen their comments on these news websites. CMC researchers remain heavily beholden to the disclosed identity and location information that online users include on their posts (Al-Saggaf, 2006). Judging from the eclectic locales shown in the retrieved data, a good number of online users and commentators live outside the Arab world.

The globalized public sphere, facilitated by the Internet and reflected in these comments, is characterized by “globalized diversity,” not sameness (Volkmer, 2003). Volkmer describes a similar phenomenon about the effect of global news on national public spheres, and how new communication technologies are extending the national public sphere to become more globalized and diversified. In this “global network society,” the global flow of news creates transnational spaces and endows global news with local relevance (Volkmer, 2003). Within these processes, news websites of Al Jazeera.net and Al Arabiya.net constitute a formidable force in providing rich content, but allowing the fermentation and formulation of public opinion that extends beyond the borders of Arabic speaking locales. The frame that emerges from these online comments, “Islam under attack,” regarding the Swiss minaret ban and the so-called “Ground Zero Mosque” incidents are pertinent to indigenous Muslim audiences, Arabic speaking expatriates have a chance to contribute to the debate as well. In the final count, the globalized public sphere heralds and implies a degree of hybridization that may reshape political identities (Kraidy, 2005; Volkmer, 2003).

Finally, this article concludes with pointing to two significant implications of studying Arab reader comments regarding global politics. First, these commenting features on online news sites constitute a genuinely democratic space for dialogue among different members of the Arab public. The level of “editorial” control involved in these comments is difficult to gauge. As far as the researchers can tell, the comments’ language and tenor reflect a greater degree of openness, spontaneity and lesser control, aspects remarkably absent from political life in the Arab world. In that sense, these comments present some unfiltered and raw views of Arabic speaking audiences. Further, these readers come from both the Arab world as well as outside the region, according to the available data, indicating a “globalized” Arab public opinion. Finally, the new online public sphere does make it possible for Arab citizens to circumvent and challenge traditional authoritarian controls.

The second main implication of the study is that political openness and diversity of the online Arab public sphere spurns ready-made theoretical labels, such as Huntington’s (1996) “clash of civilizations” thesis, used to explain how Arab and Muslim public opinion engage with global politics. In dealing with controversies similar to the Swiss ban on the construction of minarets and the so-called “Ground Zero Mosque,” the online Arab public sphere places them in a rich political context where Arab regimes become as vulnerable and subject to criticism as other foreign countries. The absence of the “sacrosanct” is conducive to rejecting conspiracy-minded political controversies. The fast pace of globalization has “retribalized” politics, globalizing local politics, according to Barber (1992). If the seemingly opposite forces of Jihad and McWorld are shaping human civilizations, as Barber claims, the power of the
Internet lies in bringing together these two anachronistic and opposite forces to shape world politics. That remains an under-theorized facet of the Internet, and presents a fertile ground for future research.

Beyond the world of Facebook, Myspace and other social media, the web-pages of newspapers and news sites have potentially connected these antagonistic forces in effectively bringing users together in online discussions.

References


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