Egypt's feminist counterpublic: The re-invigoration of the post-revolution public sphere

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Abstract

This study examines the current feminist counterculture movements which appears to be reinvigorating the Egyptian public sphere. The study argues women in particular have been able to find themselves alternative ways to develop a discourse focused on a desire for social changes around which they can unite. In focusing on lifestyle issues that normally are discussed only in small private spheres, they are able to challenge norms while not provoking the state or security apparatus and avoiding becoming part of the polarised political environment. This article explores the dynamics and motivations of these groups through a case study of three of the networked feminist movements. Our data from semi-structured interviews with the founders show that they grew from networks to movements which then evolved in order to be sustainable. This article argues that through the process of their evolution, these movements are helping strengthen the public sphere and enhance Egyptian democracy.

Introduction: youth in the Egyptian public sphere

The Tahrir Square protests which led to the collapse of the Mubarak regime were hailed a major step towards democratisation, yet their demands remain unrealised as subse- quent events polarised society and political debate (Elsheikh, 2018). Yet, the desire for inclusive social reform remains strong. Egyptians, inspired by the revolution, engage and interact, promoting democratic values and challenging norms (Shehata, 2018), but to avoid suppression activists pursue a non-partisan social agenda, so avoiding challenging the regime itself. By attempting to unite Egyptians of different religions, political beliefs and ethnicities, they promote a more diverse and inclusive society that keeps the 'social justice' programme, the heart of the 2011 revolution, alive.

This article explores through a case study of networked feminist movements, how Egyptians develop alternative ways to engage in social activism without provoking the state or security apparatus. Digital technology offers opportunities for middle-class Egyptians to communicate and develop networks. Internet penetration has steadily increased across Egypt, from 0.7% to 45% 2000–2017, and Egyptian women record hav- ing lower access (39.8%) compared with men (50%) suggesting that women with resources are most likely to benefit from the affordances of digital technology.1 This article first conceptualises the public sphere, counterpublics and social movements to provide an analytical framework. The second section introduces three networked femi- nist networks and identifies their common characteristics. Following an overview of our methodology, we demonstrate how the movements were formed and evolved discussing their potential for reinvigorating the Egyptian public sphere.

Literature review: the public sphere, counterpublics and social movements

The public sphere concept (Habermas, 1989), describing how citizens come together and discuss subjects of shared concern or interest, received significant criticism from femi- nist scholars (Benhabib, 1992; Eley, 1992; Fraser, 1990). Foss and Foss (1991) argued that the exclusivity of the public sphere was due to its construction around mostly famous, deceased, White males, and that other individuals outside these categories are 'overlooked and labelled as rhetorically insignificant' (Griffin, 1996: 22). Fraser (1990) highlighted four serious problems with the Bourgeois public sphere concept: its exclu- sion of women, inequality, the strict definition of public matters and its control over 'weak' public opinion. Although Habermas' public sphere claimed to be open and acces- sible to everyone, it discriminated against women and other minorities as it was a 'mas- culinist ideological notion that functioned to legitimate an emergent form of class rule' (Fraser, 1990: 62). Minority views, especially women's concerns, are deemed private matters and women are denied a share of voice leading to 'deliberation serving as a mask of domination' (Fraser, 1990: 64). Due to this formal process of exclusion, the public sphere is dominated by the ideology of the majority. Thus, Fraser questions the Habermasian concept for not recognising social equality as a prerequisite for participa- tion. Fraser also highlights the problematic definition of public and private concerns using domestic violence against women as an example of a 'private matter' and not a 'common concern' that deserved to be addressed in public discourse. These factors lead to a sharp separation between civil society and the state and promote what Fraser calls 'weak publics' who may form opinions only, as opposed to strong publics which partici- pate in decision-making.

However, developments to public sphere theory allow us to see how more inclusive, non-hierarchical public spheres can emerge to give voice to marginalised groups within society (Hauser, 1999). Fraser (1990) developed the concept of 'subaltern counterpublics': members of 'subordinated social groups' such as women 'invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (Fraser, 1990: 67). Performing the role of a micropublic sphere, counterpublics unite subordinated marginalised groups and mobilise members to take actions that give them access to dominant publics (Thorsen and Sreedharan, 2019). Through this process, multiple counterpublics can emerge. To differentiate between these, Squires (2002) defined them as enclaves, which operate outside of society to avoid oppres- sion and sanctions; counterpublics which emerge as threats of oppression diminish and they acquire resources; and satellites, collectives which exist interdependent of the wider public. Toepfl and Piwoni (2017) further suggest two types of counterpublic. Counterpublics with 'inward oriented goals' concentrate on creating alternative identities, interests and needs, which are typically pursued in safe, secluded communicative spaces. Alternatively, counterpublics with 'outward-oriented goals' target and engage with dominant publics working towards the 'breaking up and shifting of consensus structures within dominant publics' (Toepfl and Piwoni, 2017: 4). Arguably, one could see this as a continuum, a coun- terpublic may emerge as inward-looking but through growth in numbers and activism become outward-looking to seek wider influence.

Countering Fraser's weak versus strong counterpublics argument, Fiig (2011) argued an opinion formation counterpublic, which Fraser would describe as weak, offers 'a range of democratic potentials in relation to democracy and citizenship practice' (p. 293). In a global age, Fiig suggests citizenship includes four main components: rights, responsibilities, participation and identity (Fiig, 2011: 292), promoting that any aspect plays a role in strengthening society. Hence, the existence of multiple publics or counter- publics, whatever their capability, is described as essential for democracy (Fiig, 2011; Knoppers, 2014).

Whether the digital environment facilitates a public sphere or counterpublics is hotly debated (Dahlberg, 2001; Papacharissi, 2002), although their features are similar. Papacharissi (2002) argues access and literacy inequalities hinder the inclusivity and equality criteria, and so replicate the exclusivity of the bourgeois public sphere. Kruse et al. (2018) added four further factors restricting the emergence of a digital public sphere: (1) fear of online harassment, (2) workplace surveillance, (3) engaging only with people who are ideologically similar and (4) social media acting as a 'happy area' for interac- tions. However, Dahlberg (2001) offered six criteria against which digital environments might be assessed as a public sphere: autonomy from state and economic power, exchange and critique of moral-practical validity claims, reflexivity, ideal role-taking, sincerity, and discursive inclusion and equality. Poor (2005) offered a similar perspective using four conditions: (1) they should be spaces of discourse, often mediated; (2) should allow for new, previously excluded, discussants; (3) topics discussed are of a political nature; and (4) ideas are judged on merit, not the status of discussants. In turn, Dahlgren (2005: 153) offered three criteria to measure the presence of an online public sphere; it requires a structural dimension which focus on how these spaces are configured, focusing on their legal, social, economic and technical features. Participation allows a representational dimension which permits 'pluralism of views, accuracy of coverage' supported by the interactional dimension: the 'exchange of views and opinions among citizens'. This includes interactions between citizens and the wider media environment.

There is much debate whether the westernised Habermasian public sphere can be applied to Arab and Islamic contexts. Salvatore (2007) argues Habermas 'significantly underplayed the role of religious traditions' (p. 2). Khamis and Sisler (2010) argue cyber- activism in Arab contexts lacks Habermas' 'communicative action' which evidences rational thinking. They assert the dominant pattern of discourse is 'asserting the superiority and righteousness of one's own position'. Witschge (2004) agrees, arguing the Internet could play a negative role in democracy as it can enhance polarisation and limit diversity of opinions with interactions resembling a 'shouting match' (p. 115). However, Radsch and Khamis (2013) argue that social media provide Arab women with 'new tools to articulate their identities and participate in the public sphere' (p. 884) especially in societies where their freedoms are severely restricted. Khamis and Sisler (2010) further add that the 'islam- ization, gender inclusiveness and growing transnationalism' (p. 280) in the Arab cyber- space make it different from the 'Eurocentric, bourgeois, male dominated and secular Habermasian public sphere' (p. 280), but clarify that the new Arab cyberspace still meets the basic requirements of the Habermasian criteria: 'equal access, openness to popular participation, and diversity'. Eickelman and Salvadore (2002) highlights a 'multiplicity of over-lapping public spheres' exist in the Muslim World which fits with Frazer notions of subaltern counterpublics. However, Salime (2016) preferred the term 'embedded counter- publics', arguing that Fraser's subaltern counterpublics suggest that the publics are 'outsid- ers and marginal' while in reality they are 'embedded' with no 'outside social location' and are not 'marginalised to the social settings' where their causes emerge (p. 50).

Recent examples of embedded counterpublics or micropublic spheres include some online movements emerging in the Arab World, such as the #EndMaleGuardianship campaign organised by Saudi Women (Thorsen and Sreedharan, 2019). Sasha (2013) argues cyber activism can overcome sociocultural obstacles, as digital technologies pro- vide Arab feminists the space for activism they lack offline. As Thorsen and Sreedharan (2019) argue, analysing female online counterpublics emerging in the Arab World: 'Such activism features a lack of institutional and cultural norms: it is bodiless, which enable women to choose their identities, to express and write about marginalisation and to chal- lenge the system of patriarchy' (p. 5).

Online counterpublics played a significant role in the Arab spring (Salvatore, 2013). In Egypt, the 'we are all Khaled Said'[2] Facebook page was the main platform that mobi- lised protestors to go to Tahrir Square and protest on the 25 January 2012 (Alaimo, 2015; Elsheikh, 2018), leading the Egyptian revolution to be described as the Facebook revolu- tion (El-Bendary, 2013). According to Fraser's (1990) concept of weak versus strong publics, the Facebook group was aimed at opinion formation only (i.e. weak public) and was not decision-making (i.e. strong public). Yet, its impact went beyond opinion forma- tion. Hence, we ask how can a weak, online counterpublic grow and evolve, and trans- form into an online networked social movement or micropublic sphere with the potential to reinvigorate the actual public sphere?

From collective action to strong counterpublic

Tarrow (2011) argues contentious collective action is foundational for social movements, and collective actions become contentious when utilised 'by people who lack regular access to representative institutions, who act in the name of new or unaccepted claims, and who behave in ways that fundamentally challenge others or authorities' (p. 7). This definition can be applied to the networked social movements in Egypt. For networked movements to achieve their goals, they have to connect with each other through a shared 'sorrow and hope' bridging political and personal affiliations (Castells, 2015). Through networked connections, members express their values and identities, and organise social life by learning how to co-exist within democratic structures regardless of their differ- ences (Castells, 2015). By creating communities, they build a sense of 'togetherness', the key 'psychological mechanism to overcome fear' (Castells, 2015), through group soli- darity by occupying online or offline spaces (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012).

Political opportunities are a 'consistent – but not necessarily formal, permanent, or national – sets of cues that encourage people to engage in contentious politics' (Tarrow, 2011); threats include 'repression, but also the capacity of authorities to present a solid front to insurgents – that discourage contention' (p. 32). In the Egyptian context, both opportunities and threats were present as political participation, and dissent were sup- pressed following the 2012 election and subsequent ousting of elected president Morsi. Suppression involved regime control over traditional media and attempts to restrict social media, and a lack of social reform amid a prolonged war on terrorism. These fac- tors combined to give rise to contentious collective action, where citizens believe their goals or aspirations would not be fulfilled by government thus they must create the con- ditions for reform themselves.

Mobilising structures are 'collective vehicles, informal and formal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action' (McAdam et al., 2012). The Egyptian revolution highlighted social media, mainly Facebook, as having significant mobilis- ing power (Eltantawy and Wiest, 2011). The continuing utility of Facebook as a mobi- lisation tool for social movements echoes Castells' (2015) 'autonomous space of flows of Internet networks' where movements seek an alternative space for activism beyond state control. Challenges to Egypt's regime are met with brutal repression; however, non-political causes and movements that do not threaten the regime are often supported or at least covered by traditional media. Traditional media coverage of social media activism introduces the cause to a wider public, as demonstrated dur- ing the Arab spring (Iskander, 2011). As mainstream media dedicate full programmes to content popular on social media platforms awareness grows and the potential for mobilisation increases.

The combination of political opportunities and mobilising structures remain insuffi- cient to produce collective action if not accompanied by a cultural framing process. Cultural framing mediates between political opportunity and the mobilising structure, as it dictates the shared meaning people link to a cause. Shared grievances and a belief that they can overcome hegemonic forces are preconditions for collective action. Without this framing, 'it is unlikely that people will mobilize, even if they have the opportunity' (McAdam et al., 2012: 5). Research on the psychology of mobilisation stresses the short- and long-term importance of framing. Protests can emerge around narrow objectives and mobilise citizens by manipulating emotions to create a social movement, yet movements collapse after achieving their short-term goals due to lacking a shared long-term societal vision (Adi et al., 2018). Cultural framing promotes a collective identity and creates a 'togetherness' concept (Castells, 2015) developing a 'conscience collective, focusing cognitive and moral unity' (Collins, 2001: 28) through emotional attachment. Feminist movements emphasise the importance of emotional dynamics, highlighting 'the love and caring, on the one hand, and the anger, pain, and hostility, on the other, that characterize feminists' interactions' (Taylor, 1995: 229). How Egyptian feminist movements exploited the political opportunities, mobilising structures and framed their collective activities shapes our presentation of data.

Methodology

This article explores the dynamics of three feminist Facebook communities. These are a closed 'secret' Facebook group, an open Facebook group and an open Facebook page. In order to gather in-depth data on the motivations, perceptions and activities of those highly involved, semi-structured interviews were conducted in Arabic with the page founder by telephone in November 2018, each interview lasted 60–90minutes. Interviews (Harvey, 2011) enabled the gathering of data on the mechanisms that led to the creation of social media pages, key insights into the inner workings of the net- worked movements, their development and future potential and challenges. The inter- views were transcribed and translated, then thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was conducted, transcripts were read and themes within each interview identified inductively prior to seeking key similarities to allow comparison; the themes are used to structure the presentation of data.

Each of the three interviewees was well-educated women, from upper middle and upper-class backgrounds, in their 30s as follows:

1. Doaa Gawish founded 'The Hair Addict' group, February 2016 (154,219 mem- bers[3]), which is an open group encouraging women to leave their hair wavy or curly, counter to imposed standards of Egyptian beauty. Women are taught how to care for their hair, and how to withstand criticism in a judgmental society. Any female Facebook user can request to join the group without referral, and any request is assessed by the group admin. Gawish graduated from the American University in Cairo and used to work in a multi-national company in Egypt.

2. Zeinab Al-Ashry founded 'Confessions of a Married Woman', October 2013 (101,473 members[4]), which is a closed Facebook group of friends later opened to anyone referred by a member. 'Confessions' are posted anonymously through SurveyMonkey to encourage members to speak about their marital problems in order to raise awareness of married women's rights, sexual education and related issues. They are currently expanding their work by creating public groups in addition to their main secret group. Al-Ashry graduated from Cairo University and used to work for an international company in Egypt.

3. Nadine Kenawy founded Rakmaga May 2015, a page with over 11,000 likes, which is publicly selling high-quality imported modest swimsuits aiming to empower women who wear the hijab to use swimming facilities. In Egypt, swim- ming facilities used by the upper and middle class usually prevent women with a hijab from using the facilities because appropriate swimwear is unavailable. The page provides an alternative to this exclusion. Since it is a page anyone can see it without having to join. Kenawy graduated from the American University in Cairo and used to work as a journalist in a prestigious independent Egyptian newspaper.

The interviewees were happy to be identified within the research as they already have a public profile and have appeared on Egyptian media discussing their activism, thus there would be no greater risk to them as a result of this publication.

Networked social movements characteristics

This section will highlight the common themes among these groups.

Unintended movements

None of the Facebook groups were created with the intention of creating a movement, and they were simply friendship communities. As the membership grew, the founders realised their potential and permitted further growth so their group could evolve and adopt the character of a networked social movement. According to interviewees, they feel they have created social movements and borrow techniques used by social move- ments to have a positive societal impact.

Gawish was first to realise the potential societal impact of The Hair Addict: 'It's a natural hair movement, advocating change via the power of the collective. We are a social movement'. She highlighted that group members easily recognise other members in the street just from the way their hair looks. Thus, 'The Hair Addict' created a collec- tive identity spearheading what was described as 'the revolution of curly hair in Egypt' (BBC Arabic, 2018). Rakmaga's Kenawy, although the project started with a profit motive, argued the idea was mainly about 'accepting the other and changing image. It's about culture'. Similarly, Al-Ashry, who initially thought she and her friends were the only ones who suffered from marital problems, found the network allowed many Egyptian women to escape the 'bubble' they were living in and learn about the problems of other women. As members increased and the scale of issues was revealed, Al-Ashry realised 'it's not just a Facebook group but a much bigger movement'.

As pages morphed into movements, the founders began framing membership as being part of a collective to develop the movement offline. After approaches from several inter- national companies seeking new markets for sulphate free, natural hair products, and who needed endorsements for their products, The Hair Addict organised their first event. Members were able to meet face to face for the first time, but also meet experts who pro- vided training and gave samples of products for curly hair. Similarly, demand led Rakmaga to start selling swimsuits offline in coastal resorts, expanding their range to include cheaper alternatives for middle-class women. In addition, they supported Egyptian women to start businesses manufacturing swimsuits to sell through Rakmaga. Kenawy explained, 'It supports our goal to empower veiled women in Egypt to find good swimsuits to wear so they are not prevented from using the facilities'. Similarly, Al-Ashry started organising expert workshops, set up support groups for divorced and single mothers, produced live interactive video sessions and tried to build 'partnerships with governmental bodies to help women start their own projects'. With membership increasing and more issues being exposed, Al-Ashry realised she 'needed to give these women tools that empower them and help them overcome their problems, which can't be done on a Facebook group alone'. Hence, all the communities developed an offline dimension to engage with broader soci- ety and extend their societal mission.

Non-partisan spaces

The interviewees made it clear that they avoid involvement in formal politics, refuse to be politicised and do not allow political content on their pages to avoid representing a threat to the regime. Hence, they frame their activities in accordance with the laws and policies of the current Egyptian system and as social, cultural and class-specific behav- ioural changes, so allowing for negotiation and compromise. Members are largely ordi- nary citizens, with no history of political activism. They interact with governmental bodies and non-

governmental organisations (NGOs), as Al-Ashry explained, 'only to reach their social and cultural change goals'.

Members' comments are monitored and they check the profiles of those who request membership prior to acceptance. According to Gawish at a minimum 'The Hair Addict' 'filters members. We look at their comments' trends and education. Unfortunately, the level of education in Egypt is linked to courteousness'. This restricts membership to the middle and upper classes, but protects the page from politicisation. Fake accounts are blocked as are those who use social media to spread fake news, or promote a political position or ideology. They also remove inappropriate content to ensure the page is pro- tected from the political polarisation characterising Egyptian society.

Confessions of a married woman, meanwhile, is a secret group meaning someone in the group must invite a new member. All requests to join are reviewed and discussions are moderated, as members raise very sensitive and controversial topics. The admins remove any content they consider to be judgemental, such as personally critical com- ments or ones that refer to religion or ideology. Moderation reminds members of the group rules and is framed as providing a non-hierarchical space safe from discrimination and societal polarisation.

By avoiding politics, and working within the Egyptian legal framework, both 'The Hair Addict' and Rakmaga frame their activities as empowering and mobilise members to buy into their business proposition to enable growth. Confessions of a married woman is also keen to cooperate with government and other NGOs to empower women. Al-Ashry bluntly stated she has and wants nothing to do with politics. In fact, she argues pursuing social change is not simply the business of politicians: 'Many people start projects on their own. Like girls going to poor areas teaching women to make handcrafts, then sell them on Facebook. These initiatives don't need politics'. Kenawy elaborates, 'In Egypt, normal citizens and NGOs implement social change as the government will not do these things and people can't change the governments. But we can change ourselves and we can change those around us'. Hence, these activists provide the tools to support individual change which in turn can lead to social change but outside of the structures of partisan politics. Hence, they avoid competing with or challenging the political elite by creating a counterpublic that subtly challenges social norms and encourages behavioural change.

A social strategy for cultural change

The communities focus on offering options to help women take decisions that help them overcome their challenges. 'The Hair Addict' fought social norms that meant women felt ashamed and were mocked and criticised as looking messy, unprofessional and ugly for leaving their hair natural and so felt compelled to use straighteners (Aboughazala, 2018). The page created the 'The Hair Addict routine' giving woman practical advice to make their hair look good during the first stages of having natural hair. They reviewed products on sale as well as explaining how products can be prepared at home in response to com- plaints about the high prices of natural hair products on the market. The page also gave tips and advice on how to respond to criticism. The concept of giving 'alternatives' was framed as empowering women to change themselves and the attitudes of others, a con- cept that also drove the Rakmaga initiative. Rakmaga's founder located items on sale outside Egypt, imported them and resold them to Egyptian women. It also offered cheaper Chinese alternatives for those unable to afford American brands. Thus, women were given choices which enabled them to combat exclusion. Confessions of a married woman developed this strategy further, Al-Ashry explained,

the moment I felt ignorance is a blessing was when we empowered women without giving them the necessary tools to change their reality. Such as letting a woman realise she is in a violent abusive relationship, yet she can't leave *as she can't finance herself and her children.*

As a result, the group developed initiatives targeting women in their 40s and 50s. For example, they provide training in starting a business, and completion of the course was rewarded with investment, with the help of sponsors, to women who demonstrated busi- ness acumen. The courses are open to all women and are free with the help and sponsor- ship of NGOs so aiming to reach a wider segment of Egyptian middle-class women.

Shared grievances and hopes

Although the groups have distinct missions, solidarity around grievances and the hope for change provides a cultural bond that drives growth and sustainability. The Hair Addict was the passion of the founder. Gawish

started a blog as a hobby sharing tips with like-minded other women. A shared grievance around the compulsion to conform created connective solidarity, transforming the page into a networked social movement that would later support a business. Gawish explained,

I am personally very passionate about the topic and its social and cultural impact. Criteria are imposed on us by our society. To the extent that it became important to bully and destroy the self-esteem and confidence of those who don't fall within these criteria.

Confessions of a married woman started with a group of friends discovering they suf- fered similar marital problems but were trapped by assuming 'it was only me'. Through a snowball effect, it was transformed to an outlet for women to post problems and vent grievances anonymously. Al-Ashry explained, 'The reason behind the idea of posting confessions or questions anonymously was that there are issues we need to talk about in private. So, from here came the idea of sending the problems anonymously'.

The anonymous sharing developed its own momentum because women were empow- ered to discuss their issues and more importantly find the tools to change their lives. 'Confessions' uncovered hidden problems in society, particularly women's sexual heath issues, which women were embarrassed to speak about or even consult a doctor, particu- lar when the doctor is a family friend or relative. One example Al-Ashry highlighted was vaginismus:

Before the group, almost no one knew about vaginismus, even myself. Even when some went to doctors, doctors did not know about it. We did a video with a female gynaecologist, she told me that after the video 50 women from the group called her and booked appointments. These are group members who are middle class and educated. What about the rest of women in the society?

Al-Ashry argued anonymous posting built bonds and established solidarity among members as for the first time they could speak to someone who understood what they were going through:

There are also some viruses such as sexually transmitted diseases; no one has information. And of course, I can't tell a friend that I got a sexually transmitted virus from my husband who is cheating on me! Who shall discuss this with? It is even embarrassing to speak with a doctor. So, there are a lot of issues that you can't share with anyone and it doesn't just affect you psychologically but it affects your health.

While perhaps of lesser social significance, the reason for establishing Rakmaga shares similarities. In response to being prevented from using swimming facilities in one resort, Kenawy and her friends resorted to purchasing attire online to gain access. Motivated by a desire to help other women, Kenawy developed this into a business, explaining,

The original goal was to empower veiled women in Egypt to find good swimsuits that allow them to swim and be happy, not embarrassed, and no one criticizing them or preventing them from using the facilities which affects their confidence and self-esteem and prevent women – being a mother, daughter or wife – to enjoy activities with her children, parents or partner.

Providing collective representation

Each group thus exposed issues in Egyptian society that were deemed private and so were hidden and sought to fill that representational gap. Their work involves highlight- ing questions raised by Egyptian women focusing on the role of education, media, NGOs, religious institutions and the health sector in Egypt in addition to promoting legislation protecting diversity, protected characteristics and confidentiality. They also raise questions about market supply and demand in the case of Rakmaga and The Hair Addict. But because they frame the groups as a transformation of a personal passion into a collective support network, some with a built-in profit motive, they do not overtly challenge institutions of power and so are given space to operate. By focusing on sup- porting individuals to change, they do not challenge government or attempt to change laws; rather they stand apart from partisan and protest politics supporting the individual to challenge social norms.

The need to stand apart from partisan politics does limit their goals, however. Their roots in self and collective help mean they have no concrete strategy to implement broader societal change. Rather, as they evolved, the groups started learning and devel- oping short-term tools and techniques. They learned how to maintain interest, manage and administrate the groups and developed strategies to mobilise members to attend offline events, courses and workshops. Al-Ashry explained, 'I work by trial and error, with no exact plan. I discover problems

and try to find solutions for them. Sometime it works and sometimes it doesn't'. The absence of a long-term strategy raises serious questions about their future. With time, the novelty factor and sense of collectivity may fade, and to be sustainable they need funding. Both Rakmaga and The Hair Addict were transformed into a business which, according to the founders, purely supports future activities. Confessions of a married woman collect funds from an online directory of experts, doctors and therapists who were specialists in the issues raised. Experts pay a small fee to be listed on the publicly accessible website. This tactic avoids the group objectives being blunted by profit seeking. While the current focus is on the social aspect, transforming these communities into a business risks developing 'calculative behaviour' (Hirschman, 1977) which diverts energy and negatively affects the socially transforma- tive framing of their mission.

Discussion and conclusion

The failure of the Egyptian revolution to bring societal reform, coupled with political polarisation and repression, left a space for action. Egyptian feminists like many of their counterparts in the Arab and Islamist world act as a bridge between government and the citizenry. In this sense, they represent the building blocks for a feminist civil society. This case study of three groups, all emerging from a Facebook community to become net- worked communities, demonstrates how the political and social conditions of Egypt, in particular the lack of access to representation, as with other contexts (Castells, 2015), provided the conditions for the groups to gain members and evolve. Without the intention of creating a counterpublic social movement, but because they eschewed partisan politics, the communities offered mechanisms through which Egyptian women feel empowered to challenge social norms and provided a voice for their shared challenges. By framing small changes in behaviour as empowering, these communities were able to attract and mobilise significant numbers. The women who started and largely populate these communities are an elite; they enjoy many freedoms and had successful careers although still finding rules imposed by masculine perspectives impinge on their self-identity and inclusion in society. Yet, due to their resources, they can lead a movement for reform in a way that suits exist- ing frameworks and arguably the movements they created can initiate gradual change for the wider female population of Egypt. Hence, the study shows how activists can form micropublic spheres, and then have the capacity to evolve into inward-looking then out- ward-looking counterpublics which impact on the wider public sphere.

Each group started as a friendship network resembling a micropublic sphere, a space where a small group of individuals come together and talk about common concerns or interests using a shared framework of understanding (Hauser, 1999). Whether through recommendation, accidental exposure or peer-to-peer recommendation, these micropub- lic spheres attracted larger numbers transforming shared concerns into a shared societal vision where women could wear their hair as they wish, combine religious observance with the use of swimming facilities and overcome patriarchal control of their bodies. The three groups thus became inward-looking counterpublics (Toepfl and Piwoni, 2017), and they shared their concerns and framed their challenging of norms as part of a collective identity, mobilising members to alleviate the issues they experienced: exclusion, dis- crimination or abuse. The group founders then saw an opportunity to broaden their reach, subtly through selling products online and on the streets, gaining media exposure, organ- ising fairs and workshops. Even 'Confessions of a married woman' while remaining a secret group for anonymous interaction, created a more public separate profile, first an open Facebook page, second a web-based database for specialised support and consul- tancies and then organising workshops and courses to educate women. These events opened up their framework for change to a wider group of Egyptian women.

These offline activities transformed the groups to be outward-looking (Toepfl and Piwoni, 2017: 4), changing social norms through increasing their visibility. The fact Egyptian women could be accepted with natural hair, participate in family activities at a swimming pool and access advice and support on sensitive health issues may not seem transformative in Western society but represents a significant step towards greater free- dom in the Arab and Islamic context (see also Thorsen and Sreedharan, 2019).

Social media provided a transformative space, allowing the creation of micropublic spheres within a broader counterpublic sphere, a space that consists of many groups seeking societal reform in Egypt. The communities did not offer distractions from real world problems as scholars suggest (Kruse et al., 2018), but spaces for women to share feelings and outrage discuss ways to overcome their problems and develop a discourse of hope for change. Social media offer safe spaces, where groups could form in a con- trolled way, even being secret, to prevent harassment and surveillance. However, due to the political context and framing of the communities, they do not conform to the defini- tion of a strong counterpublic, rather they resemble opinion formation counterpublics (Fraser, 1990). Their actions are geared towards changing social norms, as opposed to changing

legislation. But through opinion formation, they seem to prove 'deliberation has intrinsic value' (Fiig, 2011: 292). Fiig (2011) argues opinion formation counterpub- lics are powerful as they 'foster issues, politicizing narratives, to develop public recog- nition and to engender participation, identity formation and democratic learning'. (p. 292). Deliberation has been proven crucial for many feminist movements helping them transition from opinion formation to decision-making by challenging norms which rein- force masculine 'domination' (Fraser, 1990). An example is how 'testimonials by women whose human rights have been violated' paved the way towards recognising 'women's rights as human rights' (Ackerly and Okin, 1999: 137). A number of feminist movements in the late 1990s moved their discourse from the private sphere out into the public arena 'with the intention of gaining recognition' (Fiig, 2011: 301; see also Tarrow, 2011). Through a 'discursive but highly disruptive critique of hierarchy and patriarchy', feminist movements have demonstrated the 'power to disrupt' established norms and traditions through innovative ways without the need to threaten public order (Tarrow, 2011). Similar themes are found in the South Korean women's movement against strict beauty standards known as 'Escape the corset' (Haas, 2018) and the black natural hair movement (Kasprzak, 2017) which led to relaxed restrictions for in the US military (Rhodan, 2014).

While our data show the Egyptian feminist communities adhere to Fraser's criteria for a counterpublic, they do not satisfy all the criteria for an online public sphere (Dahlberg, 2001; Poor, 2005). They are not inclusive, focusing mainly on forming communities of more privileged Egyptian females, and with two focusing on selling products can be seen as reliant to some extent on market forces. One might also argue that while the apolitical stance is beneficial in an Egyptian context, this may also mean that they are limited in their ability to exact change. But, while constrained by their context, their autonomy from any form of political influence means that they are able to have open discussions, and shape their agenda to the needs of their community while seeking to change the social norms and attitudes that prevail and keep women subordinate to some degree. One might also argue that these counterpublics resemble to an extent the original Habermesian con- cept of the public sphere in terms of being limited to an elite group of the middle and upper middle class who are educated, bilingual and have access to resources and more importantly have the luxury to quit their jobs and dedicate time to nurture their move- ments. Just as Habermas described the public sphere emerging in the world of letters and literary circles, flourishing in spaces where scholars and entrepreneurs could discuss mat- ters of common concern, Egypt may be entering a similar phase of development with the emergence of a parallel, feminist public sphere. Deliberation processes are emerging, and the framing of common concerns resonates with the Habermasian (1989, 2006) concept of communicative action. Kruse et al. (2018: 63) defines communicative action as 'The opposite of strategic speech where an individual engages in coercive tactics to sway opin- ions' and characterised by 'respectful and open communication, without intimidation, and is integral to the healthy existence of a participatory democracy leading to action in the way of social movements'. The exchange of views and the way these outlets are moder- ated to avoid unacceptable personal or partisan communicative behaviour ensures mem- bers are not 'asserting the superiority and righteousness of one's own position' (Khamis and Sisler, 2010) or discussion descending into a 'shouting match' (Witschge, 2004: 115) thus arguably they contribute to embedding democratic values to an extent.

The revolution allowed new ideas to flourish, and these bourgeois females formed communities to discuss issues of a personal nature tapping into a broader desire for change. The emergence of these counterpublics was facilitated by the resources of the individuals, their higher levels of education, connections with the West and having the resources to get involved in civil society. While they describe themselves as social and cultural movements, they can be seen as emergent micropublic spheres or counterpub- lics, with Facebook providing the space that mirrors the coffee houses described by Habermas as the home for open political debate. With political discussion suppressed, these counterpublics can develop means for keeping the ideas of the revolution alive in a way which does not challenge authority. But they are far from being in a position where they can steer governmental laws and policies, hence we might describe Egypt as being in the phase of having a proto-public sphere, a bourgeoisie group has emerged to discuss issues in our case study focusing on women's personal concerns, and these are being

noticed by a wider public. But there is no public sphere to engage meaningfully with, hence their strategy has to be one of gradualism and simplicity in terms of their goals. It was necessary for them to work around issues that polarised families and communities and frame their communities around common social and cultural bonds resulting from the everyday experiences of women in Egypt. These social and cultural bonds can help spread the values of democracy and democratic society. The community founders claim success based on the objectives they set at each stage, be it the amount and nature of interactions between members, increased member numbers or increased demands for their products or services. The founders also count the external recognition they receive as evidence of impact. For example, Al-Ashry was chosen by 'She Entrepreneurs' a Swedish Institute leadership programme for female entrepreneurs in the Middle East and North Africa who are building

successful and sustainable businesses with the potential to make a difference in their societies, to participate in a 12-day workshop in Sweden in June 2019. The groups also cite media coverage as evidence of their reach and potential (Aboughazala, 2018). They argue that media interviews enriches public debate to an extent, citing appearances on the 'ElSafira Aziza' and '90 Minutes' talk shows as evi- dence as well as invitations to talks organised by various embassies and international organisations in Egypt.

However, there are no guarantees that their impact will be long-lasting. Marketisation, politicisation, class exclusivity and lacking a strategy that unites new and old members pose threats to their growth as outward-looking counterpublics. The decline of the com- munities may be a result of pursuing profit over social change (Hirschman, 1977), or becoming aligned to one side of the polarised political landscape if they seek sponsorship from government or an opposition group as this will expose divisions within the move- ment. Furthermore their exclusionary policy can result in them being seen as bourgeois, lacking relevance for wider society, with product-driven solutions making them appear only for the affluent, while a lack of focus on a wider package of feminist issues may result in their redundancy. If members feel marginalised, they tend to leave a movement rather than campaigning for changes in strategy or internal distribution of power (Roth, 2007).

However, at present they demonstrate communicative power can be disruptive (Tarrow, 2011) without resorting to behaviours that challenge the political system. Working within existing frameworks of activity, while framing community membership within the hope borne out of the 2011 revolution, they were able to expand their activities moving from micropublic sphere, through the stage of being inward-looking to position- ing themselves as an outward-looking counterpublic seeking gradual change to societal norms relating to masculine dominance over women. Thus, this small case study allows us to identify the emergence of a proto-public sphere. Despite suppression of debate and dissent they were able to harness, the affordances of social media to voice concerns, build a community and then mobilise the collective identity fostered by framing their work in terms of empowering women. Whether these specific communities can over- come their challenges may not matter, as we can view them as potential catalysts for much-needed societal changes. They may be introducing feminist ideas that can perme- ate Egyptian society as the work they and other counterpublics do builds a stronger, feminist public sphere through challenging norms, empowering women and fostering deliberation online, face to face and through the media.

Notes

1. Data from Statistica: https://www.statista.com/statistics/733570/egypt-Internet-penetration- countries-gender/, the latest published data were collected in 2017.
2. Said was beaten and tortured while in police custody in 2010. This led to the creation of a Facebook page called 'we are all Khaled Said' through which the revolution was organised. The page which had hundreds of thousands of followers urged Egyptians to participate in anti-government demonstrations on 25 January 2011 – Egypt's National Police Day. Eighteen days later, Mubarak was forced to resign.
3. Figures checked on 13 April 2019.
4. Figures checked on 13 April 2019.

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