

# OVERCOMING THE LIMITATIONS OF SHARED DIGITAL SPACES

## Twitter in the Egyptian Revolution of 2011

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In January of 2011, audiences around the globe witnessed via social media platforms as protestors took to the streets of Egypt in an uprising that led to the removal of Hosni Mubarak from power after a 30-year reign characterized by violence and oppression. While social media platforms such as Twitter were an affordance in building a transnational community of support, these interfaces also became a liability as activists negotiated the ostensible transparent immediacy of the interface that invited the uncritical gaze of audiences that, in the case of many Western audiences, potentially threatened to undermine the work of protestors. While protestors' invitations to form identifications with audiences around the globe reiterated the sense of immediacy enabled by digital interfaces, their disidentifications disrupted this immediacy and reiterated the distance between their work across the streets of Egypt and the screens of distant audiences around the globe.

**Keywords.** Social media, transnationalism, protest, digital interface.

In January of 2011, thousands of protestors took to the streets of Egypt in an uprising that led to the removal of Hosni Mubarak from power after a 30-year reign characterized by violence and oppression. Audiences around the globe could witness events as they unfolded across social media platforms such as Twitter. As activists' tweets attracted the attention of this global audience, the January 25 protests grew from a local protest movement into a transnational movement that brought together the vision of local Egyptians for change with a broader community of support that extended beyond the geopolitical borders of Egypt.



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While social media platforms such as Twitter were an affordance in building a transnational community of support, these interfaces also became a liability as activists found themselves invited to confront what is in many ways a defining feature of transnationalism: its simultaneous adherence to and dissolution of boundaries. Activists found themselves negotiating what many have described as a foundation of transnationalism: it relies on and is contingent on the very borders that it seeks to cross (Howard, 2011). For example, Sidney Tarrow points out that, despite their global reach, transnational movements remain tethered to the local, “even as they make transnational claims, [transnational activists] draw on the resources, networks, and opportunities of the societies they live in” (2009, p. 2). As transnational movements remain rooted in the local, social media interfaces become a powerful influence in the ostensible dissolution of these boundaries, promising ostensibly direct access for transnational audiences. Social media interfaces do this through what Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin have described as a logic of transparent immediacy that “foster[s] in viewer[s] a sense of presence” wherein the “viewer should forget” that she is in fact experiencing an event through the mediation of an interface (1999, p. 22). This logic promises “transparent, perceptual immediacy, experience without mediation” and works to “deny the mediating presence of the computer and its interface” (p. 23). In doing so, the media’s logic of transparent immediacy enables local protests to expand into transnational movements by providing distant audiences ostensibly intimate access to events unfolding locally. While this is often a benefit to transnational movements, these interfaces also present a challenge to activists whose work remains tethered to the local circumstances that both inspire and enable it.

As activists worked across these ostensibly boundary-dissolving interfaces of social media during the January 25 protests of 2011, they found ways to negotiate and reassert the boundaries that lace through transnationalism. This essay asks how protestors during the Egyptian Revolution engaged this negotiation, this work of boundary dissolving and boundary building across social media. I ask how activists were able to garner transnational audiences of support at the same time they reiterated the local realities of life under the Mubarak regime. One answer to this question is that protestors were able to harness the affordances of Twitter’s interface

by facilitating the opening of protest spaces through invitations to form identifications at the same time that activists reasserted their lived connections to local contexts by inviting disidentifications with their audiences around the globe. While protestors' invitations to form identifications reiterated the sense of immediacy implicit to digital interfaces, their disidentifications disrupted this immediacy and reiterated the distance between their work across the streets of Egypt and the screens of distant audiences around the globe.

### **Social Media and Transnational Protest**

Activists' work across social media illustrates Christopher Wilson and Alexandra Dunn's observation that Twitter became a key resource "perpetuating the feeling that the world was watching, which was an important factor for morale and coordination on the ground" during these protests (2011, p. 1252). Sean Aday, Director of the Institute for Public Policy and Global Administration at George Washington University, and a team of researchers expand this account of Twitter's role in the revolution suggesting that, at the same time activists were communicating with each other, they were also keenly aware of the global audience watching them from a distance (2010, p. 3). A key way that protestors during the revolution garnered the attention of local and global audiences was to use Twitter as an "alternative press," as a "means for those on the ground to report what was happening for the benefit of their fellow Egyptians and the outside world" (Idle and Nunns, 2011, Introduction). While many activists were acting as citizen journalists, they were also acting as architects of transnational spaces of protest that linked the streets of Egypt with audience's screens across the globe.

These spaces gave rise to what Simon Cottle and Libby Lester describe as transnational, "as ethico-political imaginary (of what should be) and as collective political action (the struggle to bring this about)" (2011, p. 5). For Cottle and Lester, the transnational in the context of activism "becomes *instantiated* within and through communicative enactments of protest and demonstration—if only momentarily or imperfectly" (p. 5). This suggests that social media became both "*technology* and *space* for expanding and sustaining the networks upon which social

movements depend” (Lim, 2012, p. 234). Enabling this facet of social media are the designs of its interfaces, designs that are shaped by promises of transparency that invite users “to see forgetfully” (Wysocki & Jasken, 2004, p. 30) and facilitate the logic of transparent immediacy observed by Bolter and Grusin.

This promise of transparency and the invitations of co-presence that arise from it are rooted in the history of Twitter’s interface design. In his recollection of the birth of Twitter during a 2006 brainstorming meeting, Dom Sagolla, a collaborator with co-founder Jack Dorsey, writes that Dorsey’s idea “was to make [using Twitter] so simple that you don’t even think about what you’re doing, you just type something and send it” (Sagolla, 2012, “How Twitter was Born”). In his 2012 commencement address to Becker College graduates, Sagolla described the power of this simplicity, which emerged from both the minimalist interface and the ease with which users could pick up their phones, use T9 texting, and send off 140 characters to the SMS (short messaging service) short code 10958 (later, 40404), as a means of reducing “the number of steps from impulse to action.” When delivered, this promise of “transparent, perceptual immediacy” (1999, Bolter and Grusin, p. 22) has powerful implications for the social relations formed across digital spaces. For example, Sagolla describes the release of Twitter Beta among the small group of friends working on the project, writing: “I’ll never forget the family-friendly feeling of that day” (Sagolla, 2012, “How Twitter was Born”). The family-friendly feeling that Sagolla describes in this version of Twitter’s founding is reflective of both the small social circles from which this social networking technology emerged as well as Twitter’s interface design that reiterated the physical proximities characterizing this close group of friends.

Just as Twitter was designed to reiterate the close relationships among its first users, so too does its design facilitate the ostensible formation of similar relationships among current users who are frequently separated by great distances. The simplicity of the interface, its access via text messaging, and the brevity of tweets at 140 characters ultimately “[made] you feel like you’re right with that person” (2011, Carlson) according to Noah Glass, another one of the first developers of Twitter. This leads to what Glass describes as “a whole emotional impact. You feel like you’re connected with that person” (2011, Carlson). It is this

sense of connection that activists often seek to harness as they invite identifications that frequently cross global borders. This powerful sense of connection that was facilitated by the design of Twitter's interface led Dorsey to reflect in conversation with Sagolla: "One could change the world with one hundred and forty characters" (Sagolla, 2012, Forward).

The story of Twitter's founding illustrates both the intentionality with which Twitter was designed to facilitate a sense of immediacy and anticipates the powerful impact this immediacy can have when people are brought together across the interface to work for change. This sense of immediacy in the context of transnational activism, however, is both an affordance and a constraint. While it enables the opening of spaces described by Lim, it also creates a challenge for activists as they reassert the boundaries between the local and the global that are central to transnationalism. This reassertion of boundaries is of particular importance in the relationships that are forged between non-Western activists and Western audiences. The immediate transparency of these interfaces frequently invites a sense of hyper-proximity that enables unquestioned and potentially undermining ways of approaching activists' texts. As audience members' ways of knowing and their accompanying ideologies are replicated and potentially unquestioned across digital interfaces, Western audiences risk reiterating the acts of violence and injustice that activists such as those in the Egyptian Revolution were seeking to end. It is in contexts such as this that, as Cynthia Selfe and Richard Selfe point out, interfaces become "maps that enact—among other things—the gestures and deeds of colonialism, continuously and with a great deal of success" (1994, p. 482).

One of the many ways that interfaces become maps reenacting the gestures and deeds of colonialism is in inviting and affirming the Western Orientalist gaze. For example, for many Westerners, the Middle East and North Africa are increasingly known through images of violence circulated across social media and Western mainstream news outlets. These images and the information that often accompanies them "acquire[] emotional and even rational sense by a kind of poetic process, whereby the vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning for us here" (Said, 1978, p.55). Social media is ripe with opportunities for

this Orientalist gaze to thrive as images and pieces of information are continually (re)contextualized through their circulation across interfaces like those of Twitter. When the Western gaze encountered the Egyptian Revolution as a result of this circulation, the “anonymous reaches” (p. 55) of North Africa potentially became meaningful to Western audiences through a complex and historically rooted process of *knowing* the Orient despite being physically at a distance. The potential for this process of *knowing* emerged across digital interfaces as images were removed from their local cultural and historical contexts and potentially took meaning through culturally and historically informed ways of seeing such as Orientalism. These supplanted images and texts create for some audiences what Edward Said refers to as a radical reality that relies on viewers’ distance from the very thing they claim to know, the East—or, in this case, Egypt during the days of the revolution. At the same time this distance enabled audiences to claim ownership over the knowledge they were making about Egypt, the Orientalist gaze of many Western audiences invited them to also claim an intimate proximity to events that was enabled by the design of Twitter’s digital interface. Said describes the implications of the ensuing knowledge, writing:

Yet what gave the Oriental’s world its intelligibility and identity was not the result of its own efforts but rather the whole complex series of knowledgeable manipulations by which the Orient was identified by the West [...] Knowledge of the Orient, because generated out of strength, in a sense *creates* the Orient, the Oriental, and his world. (p. 40, emphasis original)

As digital interfaces such as those of Twitter enable the “knowledgeable manipulations” described by Said, so too do they potentially become spaces across which the “gestures and deeds of colonialism” are reenacted by the Western Orientalist gaze.

At the same time that interfaces invite the Orientalist’s manipulation of distance and knowledge, so too do interfaces provide a way for non-Western activists to respond to this gaze and its accompanying way of knowing. In other words, at the same time that interfaces frequently invite the Orientalist gaze of

Western audiences, so too do these interfaces also provide ways of disrupting this way of seeing, knowing, and acting brought by Western audiences. The remainder of this essay will investigate the strategies activists used to disrupt the Orientalist gaze of Western audiences by disrupting the immediacy of the interface and the ways of knowing that potentially enacted the “gestures and deeds of colonialism” (Selfe & Selfe, 1994, p. 482).

## **Method**

This study uses a case study research method to do a deep examination of one facet of a broader phenomenon with the aims of “understanding, extension of experience, and increase in conviction in that which is known” (Stake, 1978, p. 6). Specifically, this study seeks to deepen our understanding of activist discourse and the discursive strategies that were used to negotiate relationships with transnational audiences in particular. This narrow focus enables this research to account for what Mary Queen describes as the “always partial” access that researchers have to digital texts with a transnational circulation, texts that circulate in a context where “the material reality of the (re)production—both process and product—of cyberspace is neither disconnected or disembodied” (2008, p.472). As texts circulate over time across material contexts, Queen calls on researchers to also attend to the ways in which circulation transforms texts that emerge as a series of evolving rhetorical actions.

This transformation occurs not only in the original context of a text, but also through its recirculation by a case study such as this one. Beyond the frameworks that a case study brings to a text, so too does this recirculation challenge what may have become the “relative anonymity on the Internet because of the sheer volume of material” and, as a result, “potentially brings a readership to a forum which otherwise would not have that readership” (McKee and Porter, 2009, p.107). In addition to recirculating texts originally posted to Twitter in 2011, this case study, for example, is also providing, for some, a new audience for these tweets. This recirculation is not without potential implications for the author of the tweets examined here, Gigi Ibrahim, in the current climate in Egypt. Ibrahim speaks to this risk writing that “revolutionaries living in Egypt are under threat from the

current regime just because of what they stood for or still stand for when it comes to criticizing the state.” However, despite this risk, Ibrahim writes that she has “chose[n] to confront the state with my ideas publicly” and adds that this is a personal decision she has made and should not be generalized as the position of other 2011 protestors (G. Ibrahim, personal communication, November 8, 2017).

Ibrahim was selected for this study because of her prolific activity on Twitter and her visibility across a number of other platforms during the revolution. In addition to her work across Twitter, Ibrahim also gained visibility among Western audiences as a result of coverage by major news outlets. For example, Ibrahim was interviewed by *The New York Times* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. She also appeared in the PBS Frontline documentary titled *Gigi's Revolution* and was on the cover of *Time* magazine as a member of “The Generation Changing the World.” Often asked to reflect on the role of social media in the Egyptian Revolution and her use of platforms such as Twitter and Facebook during protests, Ibrahim described her role in an interview with Robert Mackey of *The New York Times* blog *The Lede*, which she gave from a coffee shop in Cairo two days into the protests that began on January 25, 2011:

Well, pretty much, I'm just like many Egyptians here, my role is to be part of this wave of change. I'm taking part of it also as an activist. So, I tweet a lot while I'm in the protest. I'm telling everybody the security situation or how many people there at the protest, if any arrests are happening. I'm reporting it. I'm contacting any lawyers in any of the human rights organizations we have here so they can follow up with the people arrested. Pretty much I'm trying to spread information, accurate information, and relate and paint the picture at the ground to people who aren't there via Twitter and Facebook. And I record videos and take pictures as well. [sic]

Because of the degree of visibility that Ibrahim established with global audiences across the West, this study largely takes what Heidi McKee and James Porter describe as a “text-based” approach to her tweets, regarding them as public published material.

The corpus of tweets examined in this case study were gathered using Twitter's updated advanced search option and span from January 15 to February 11, 2011 when Hosni Mubarak stepped down. Tweets were gathered beginning ten days before the January 25 protests began to capture some of the early phases of the revolution, its planning, and the impact of the successful protests in Tunisia that inspired many in Egypt to attempt the same. Twitter's search engine returned 844 tweets that were posted by Ibrahim during this time. Additionally, translation of Arabic text mentioned in this case study was provided by Jessika Malo Valentine.

This study reads across these tweets using grounded theory. Grounded theory enables researchers to acknowledge the dynamic and complex relationships that emerge between researchers and various data sets. Kathy Charmaz writes that grounded theory enables researchers to develop codes that "capture both [the researcher's] involvement with these data and studied world and [the researcher's] analytic separation from them" (2014, p. 115). This is of importance in research where a researcher identifying as a White, Western female is researching texts emerging from local protest movement in North Africa. While coding is responsive to the experiences researchers have with data and their perspectives on this data (Corbin and Strauss, 2012), so too does coding using grounded theory "build a series of checks and refinements into qualitative inquiry through an iterative process of successive analytic and data collection phases of research, each informed by the other and rendered more theoretical" (Charmaz, 2014, p 156).

At the same time, the coding that emerges through grounded theory reflects the positionality of the researcher, so too does it enable researchers to attend to other nuances across a data set. For example, in examining digital texts circulated across a social media interface, McKee and Porter remind researchers that the public and private always exist on a continuum in digital research. They write that public and private are always "relative" to each other and are "dependent for part of their referential meaning on the interactional context in which they are used" (Susan Gal quoted in McKee and Porter, 2009, p.78). Across the tweets analyzed in this study, this continuum emerges as Ibrahim addresses multiple layers of her audience ranging from expansive global audiences to individuals looking for directions to a march. These texts are part of this study because they illustrate the ways in which

Ibrahim actively negotiated relationships with transnational audiences and rhetorically situated her texts along this continuum, sometimes addressing an audience directly and other times positioning them as eavesdroppers on a local protest movement.

Initial coding of Ibrahim's tweets drew from earlier phases of this research on the revolution and Ibrahim's contributions to it. Specifically, the coding for this case study draws from scholarship on the discursive structural features of Twitter such as hashtags and the @user syntax. While hashtags and the @user syntax carry meaning within authors' texts, they are also directing these texts across Twitter's complex ecology of circulation. After coding the data set for this case study based on a number of discursive features, tweets were then recoded to examine more closely how Ibrahim employed discursive strategies to negotiate relationships with a range of audiences. Here, we see grounded theory's strength in fostering the study of "action and processes" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 112). Enabling this work is the careful wording of these codes using gerunds where possible. Drawing from the work of Glaser, Charmaz writes that "coding with gerunds helps you detect processes and stick to the data" (2014, p. 120). As Ibrahim's tweets were coded, processes emerged connected to the @user syntax and the hashtag, processes that I suggest contributed to her efforts to negotiate her relationship with audiences across Twitter. These codes included "reporting events and spreading information," "describing emotion," "providing commentary," and "calling to action."

## **The Negotiation of a Movement**

Gigi Ibrahim's tweets reveal a critical facet of transnational activism: the negotiation of boundaries that are simultaneously dissolved and reiterated as audiences, particularly those in the West, were welcomed into the transnational spaces of the revolution at the same time they were reminded of the limits of this space. Employing the affordances of Twitter to negotiate its constraints, Ibrahim engaged in a constant negotiation of local and global audiences, many times in the same tweet, through her use of the hashtag and the @user syntax. This nuanced work emerged in the context of transnational activism that took shape across a social

media interface that was designed to facilitate a form of transparent immediacy wherein distant audiences were invited to feel a co-presence with local events unfolding across Egypt. However, as Johanna Drucker reminds us, we must resist taking social media interfaces at face value as “portal[s] into the online world” or “as convenient translations of what is ‘really going on’ inside” our computers (2013, p. 213). Instead, Drucker points out that interfaces are “gooey” “boundary spaces” that “organize our relationships to complex systems” (2013, p. 213). In the context of transnational activism, interfaces do just this. They organize user relationships not just to technological systems, but to global and transnational systems of power as well. While on one hand these digital interfaces enable the dissolution of boundaries that extended to the spaces of the Egyptian protests, Twitter’s interface also enabled Ibrahim to reassert the boundaries of the local and the global as events were unfolding. Two ways that Ibrahim did this was through her use of hashtags and the @user syntax to invite both identifications and disidentifications with audiences around the globe. While Ibrahim’s tweets facilitated the dissolution of boundaries through the identifications she invited with audiences, her tweets also redrew these boundaries through the disidentifications that she invited. This complex dynamic enabled Ibrahim and others to transnationalize a local movement, inviting audiences around the globe to participate while reiterating the material realities of Ibrahim’s life and the lives of thousands of protestors across the streets of Egypt that gave rise to these calls for change.

### **Inviting Identifications**

Ibrahim invited the creation of a shared transnational space of protest through the identifications she formed with global audiences as a way of harnessing the immediacy engendered by Twitter’s interface design. This work was key to the transformation of a movement that grew from a long history of local protests and local resistance into a transnational movement supported by audiences around the globe. Identification for Kenneth Burke is implicitly linked to transformation (Burke, 1950, p. 543). This transformation occurs as our interests become aligned with those of another through identification. One facet of this (re)aligning of

interests is that we come to see ourselves in new social relations with others. Jane Blankenship, Edward Murphy, and Marie Rosenwasser describe this as “one’s way of seeing one’s self in the social mirror” (1974, p. 87). As Ibrahim invited these identifications with her audiences, she invited them to see themselves as part of a new social context where their interests became aligned with those of protestors during the revolution. As these identifications were taken up, Twitter became a type of social mirror, a space that reflected global audiences in a shared space alongside protestors in which they not only had an investment but also had the means to participate across Twitter.

One of the most common ways that Ibrahim invited identifications with her audiences was through her use of the hashtag. Hashtags have a significant presence across Ibrahim’s tweets leading up to and during the revolution with 43% of her tweets in this dataset including a hashtag. Hashtagging across Twitter has several antecedents including the use of hashtags by computer programmers to preface “specialized works with punctuation marks, such as \$ and \* for variables and pointers, or the # sign itself for identifying HTML anchor points” (boyd, Golder, and Lotan, 2011, p. 2). In addition to this use of hashtags by computer programmers, tagging has also emerged as a common means of social bookmarking, or breaking down larger pieces of content into smaller pieces of microcontent. For example, the social bookmarking site Delicious relies on the use of hashtags (#) and describes itself on its homepage, writing: “Never lose a link again. Delicious is a free and easy tool to save, organize, and discover interesting links on the web.” This tagging has also expanded to images across social media platforms such as Flickr where users are invited to tag specific elements of an image. Hashtagging serves a similar function in the context of Twitter: to “mark tweets topically so that others can follow conversations centering on a particular topic” (boyd, Golder, Lotan, 2011, p. 1). This marking of tweets topically with hashtags not only allowed Ibrahim’s tweets to be sorted, but also increased their visibility as hashtagging enabled other users to sort through the copious amounts of content streaming across Twitter and follow the particular conversations that Ibrahim was participating in.

Hashtagging also has a rhetorical function as a shorthand way for Twitter users to acknowledge the broader conversations they are participating in and invite

readers to also participate in these conversations. For example, during the revolution, users including #Jan25, one of the most popular hashtags during the protests, could immediately and efficiently link to the much broader conversation their tweet was participating in and, in doing so, invite their audiences to do the same. Axel Bruns and Hallvard Moe point out that hashtags are used with the intention of making a tweet more easily discoverable to others (2014, p. 17) and signal a user's "wish to take part in a wider communicative process, potentially with anyone interested in the same topic" (p. 18). In doing so, hashtags facilitate the emergence of what Bruns and Hallvard describe as "*ad hoc* issue publics." As audiences are invited to participate in these publics, they are invited to form new identifications, to align their interests with those of others across Twitter. With this in mind, Ibrahim's use of the hashtag demonstrated not only an invitation to know about the protests, but her use of the hashtag also invited an alignment with and participation in these spaces that grew through rhetorical identifications extending beyond local protestors to also include transnational audiences. The most common hashtags that Ibrahim used in the data set for this study were #Jan25 and #Egypt. Both of these were also among the top eight most popular hashtags on Twitter during 2011. The popularity of these hashtags both within the corpus of Ibrahim's tweets and all tweets circulated across Twitter points to their rhetorical significance in connecting both Ibrahim and her audiences to a broader conversation that was opened to audiences around the world through activists' use of the hashtag.

The function of the hashtag both rhetorically and structurally in linking a tweet to broader conversations across Twitter was also reiterated by the content circulated across these tweets. For example, the most common type of text in a tweet that included a hashtag was providing commentary; just over half of Ibrahim's tweets with a hashtag contained commentary on the revolution. Here commentary is defined as text providing audiences with insights about the protests that would not otherwise have been available to them. This use of commentary connected to Ibrahim's use of the hashtag further invites an alignment of interests between authors and audiences by providing insider information, information that invited and enabled an alignment of perspectives and values related to the conditions in Egypt during the protests. For example, on January 25 as marches formed across

Cairo and headed to Tahrir Square, a location that was to become in many ways the visual center of the revolution, Ibrahim tweeted: “Marching side streets in shubra gathering people as we go ..growing every second #jan25 <http://yfrog.com/h5y4voj>.” In this tweet, Ibrahim describes what is happening with a level of detail not available to most audiences outside of Egypt, provides an image that shares her first-person perspective, and includes commentary that extends the reader’s understanding of what is happening beyond what is seen in the image. While the picture included with this tweet shows that people were marching, distant audiences had no way of knowing that this gathering was “growing every second.” This commentary underscored the identification invited through the hashtag by sharing first-hand knowledge of events as they unfolded and circulating these events into the digital spaces of activism forming across social media. While the hashtag signaled Ibrahim’s invitation for audiences to form identifications through being part of the ongoing conversation across Twitter about #Jan25, Twitter’s interface facilitated the transformation of Ibrahim’s first-hand knowledge into audiences’ immediate experiences of the revolution.

A few minutes later, Ibrahim again used a hashtag to signal her invitation to form identifications with audiences around the globe. She tweeted: “Thugs all around us marching beside us #jan25 shubra <http://yfrog.com/h5ybskj>.” “Thugs all around us” is coded in this study as providing commentary because, in the image Ibrahim posted, the thugs she is referring to would not have been easily distinguished by audiences outside of Egypt. Without this descriptive commentary, some of Ibrahim’s distant readers would not have had access to this facet of her experience during the revolution. By giving her readers this level of first-hand access alongside her use of the hashtag, Ibrahim invited readers around the world to join her in the digital extensions of these spaces and see themselves as part of the “us” in the social mirror alongside her as many offered support of the revolution. As the hashtag reminds us, the relationships that were forged through this tweet and others like it were not only with Ibrahim. Instead, these identifications located transnational audiences within a much broader space of activism that included other protestors and audiences around the globe.

As audiences took up these invitations to form identifications with activists and protestors, many came to see themselves in a social mirror through which their interests came into alignment with those of protestors as they became part of a broader “us” of the revolution. This alignment manifested itself in a number of ways including solidarity protests that were held in cities around the globe, retweets, and responses across Twitter. For example, among the global audiences to enact their support across Twitter was an individual who tweeted his support from the UK: “@Gsquare86 stay safe! We are all watching and cheering you on here in rainy London!” Here we see this Twitter user coming to see himself reflected in the broader social context of the revolution and aligning his values with those of the protestors. However, at the same that this member of Ibrahim’s audience enacted his support of the protests, so too did Ibrahim’s Western audiences potentially present a threat to her work by embodying a Western gaze that threatened to coopt the Revolution, potentially making knowledge from it to support its own ends as Western audiences worked through the fraught distance between an “us” and a “them,” a distance that is vital to Orientalism. Said describes this distance as at once exaggerated and dissolved across Orientalism’s imagined geographies that “help the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far away” (1978, p. 55).

Ibrahim commented on what could be seen as the continuation of this imagined geography of Orientalism when many Western news outlets began to celebrate the revolution as a “Twitter Revolution.” For example, on February 11, *Wired* published a piece with the headline “Social Media Sparked, Accelerated Egypt’s Revolutionary Fire.” Early in this data set, Ibrahim and others critiqued this narrative of the protests referring to it as a form of “intellectual colonialism.” On January 15, Ibrahim addressed this tweeting: “believing in “Twitter revolution” is like saying because i have a laptop, i can write amazing papers ... Twitter is just a tool not a maker.” In addition to critiquing colonial narratives of the revolution, Ibrahim also provided direct response to many of the pundits who propagated it. On January 15, she retweeted a post exclaiming “Western pundits feeding on analysis to fill the news: shut the fuck up !!!” While Ibrahim and others often directly addressed this encroachment of the Western Orientalist gaze that was frequently

enabled by Twitter's interface, she also discursively addressed this threat through her tweets and the disidentifications she invited through her use of the @user syntax.

## **Inviting Disidentifications**

Kenneth Burke points out that “[i]dentification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division” (1950, p. 546). Activists sought to harness this division to support their work across both digital and physical spaces during the Egyptian Revolution of 2011. Specifically, activists such as Ibrahim utilized this division to invite disidentifications with distant audiences. This disidentification allowed activists to reassert and redraw some of the very boundaries that were ostensibly dissolved through their use of the hashtag across Twitter's digital interface. As Ibrahim and others reasserted these lines of division, they reminded audiences that the “ethico-political imagin[aries]” they articulated would come about only as a result of “collective political action” by individuals in both digital and physical spaces (Cottle and Lester, 2011, p. 5). These disidentifications qualified the identifications invited by Ibrahim's use of the hashtag by reasserting boundaries across the resulting transnational digital space of protest that was opened to audiences around the globe. Much of Ibrahim's work to do this was accompanied by the @user syntax, which reiterated the distance between Ibrahim's lived reality and the lived realities of many audiences who were reading her tweets. The @user syntax enabled Ibrahim to extend her local face-to-face relationships with other protestors into a mediatized context that highlighted the tangible social networks underpinning the revolution and reiterated disidentifications with distant audiences who were not a part of these core networks. In doing so, her use of the @user syntax also facilitated a disruption of the Orientalist ways of seeing and knowing that were potentially brought to activists' tweets by Western audiences.

One of the most common ways that Ibrahim used the @user syntax to invite disidentifications with distant audiences was by using the @user syntax to publically conduct conversations with other users who shared her local context. Of the 38% of Ibrahim's tweets that included the @user syntax, 49% were directed toward a

specific user as part of a conversation that Ibrahim was engaging in across Twitter. Many of these users were present across the streets of Egypt with Ibrahim. For example, as Ibrahim was negotiating the lack of access to the internet during the protests on January 31, she reached out to another protestor using the @user syntax to find out where she was getting internet access: “@[username] anti fen wa ezay?” or, “where are you and how have you been?” In this context, Ibrahim most likely meant to emphasize her inquiry into this user’s location since it was clear from her response that the user she was reaching out to had an internet connection. However, this user did not immediately respond to Ibrahim’s inquiry. Instead, she replied: “@Gsquare86 3ib 3alik ya gamil, ana hena men awel yom fi el sawra :)” Here, the user Ibrahim is communicating with seems to casually address Ibrahim’s question saying that she had been there since the first day of the Revolution. Ibrahim quickly responded: “@[username] no seriously i need to upload some shit, where and how do u have internet?” While this exchange reveals a number of details about the realities faced by protestors during the revolution, it powerfully distances audiences eavesdropping on Ibrahim from afar by reiterating just how distant these audiences were from the protests and the close social networks that were holding these protests together in both digital and physical spaces. This use of the @user syntax also draws into relief the ostensibly boundless conversational forum opened up by the hashtag by highlighting the boundaries of this forum with this public exchange between two protestors actively negotiating the protests on the ground.

Conversations such as the one above cut through what is often described as the noisy environment of Twitter. Honeycutt and Herring write that, “[d]espite a 'noisy' environment and an interface that is not especially conducive to conversational use, short, dyadic exchanges occur relatively often, along with some longer conversations with multiple participants that are surprisingly coherent” (2009, p. 1). For example, when Ibrahim tweeted on January 22 “I am not comfortable with all this talk on #jan25 on social networks, it better show on the streets..I will be there, will u?”, she received a reply from another protestor who used the @user syntax to initiate a conversation with Ibrahim. This Twitter user quickly replied: “@Gsquare86 I'll be there with a few friends in Mohandessin. Where will you be?” Ibrahim responded: “@[username] @[username] haven't

decided exactly yet but for sure will NOT go to Mohandseen..either Imbaba or Shubra,” to which this user responded: “@Gsquare86 @[username] Why not Mohandessin?” She replied: “@[username] @[username] nothing wrong with mohandseen, I just want to be fi makan sha3bi laken fi nas kteer nazla el mohandseen.” In this tweet, Ibrahim is saying that she wanted to go to a place where there were not going to be large crowds. Since there were already a lot of people going to Mohandseen (a neighborhood in Giza that runs along the west bank of the Nile River and adjoins the western edge of Cairo), she was going to go elsewhere where the marches might need more participants. This user responded, “@gsquare86 @[username] I understand, Rabenna ma3ana.” Rabenna ma3ana is a common saying that means God is with us or God is on our side. As this brief conversation played out in an arena that was easily visible to audiences around the globe, Ibrahim reminded distant audiences of their removal from the protests and of the boundaries that existed despite the broad transnational spaces of activism that were opened by the hashtag. In doing so, she invited disidentifications between Western audiences and non-Western audiences taking to the streets across Egypt and disrupted Orientalist gazes that potentially sought to coopt the ostensibly unrestricted knowledge of the revolution that was shared across Twitter’s digital interface.

In addition to Ibrahim’s conversations with other protestors using the @user syntax, 44% of Ibrahim’s uses of the @user syntax were retweets that included the original author’s Twitter handle. Among the functions of this use of the @user syntax in her retweets, three in particular stand out in this context. First, this repeated attribution of a text enabled Ibrahim to build her ethos with global audiences by providing evidence of others who were in agreement with her or who were corroborating her accounts of the protests. For example, on the first day of the protests, Ibrahim started the day with a series of tweets describing the mounting police presence across Cairo as she traveled to the protests and then marched to Tahrir Square. In the midst of her descriptions, Ibrahim retweeted another protestor’s description of this police presence as well: “Tahrir square looks scary. Cordons, policemen, fire trucks, CS trucks. #Jan25.” Here, Ibrahim’s retweet

provides verification of her own observations of this same mounting police presence.

Second, while this inclusion of the @user syntax didn't always lead to a full conversation, it allowed Ibrahim to include a brief comment or response to the tweet's original author. For example, the next day, Ibrahim retweeted news that public hospitals were receiving those injured during the protests and then handing them over to the police. In her retweet, Ibrahim included her response to the tweet's original author: "#a7a RT @[username]: Egyptian public hospitals receive the injured and then given them to security. #jan25 shame shame !!" "a7a" conveys Ibrahim's frustration and anger over what has happened with a function similar to "wtf" in tweets written in English.

Third, the inclusion of the original author of a tweet in Ibrahim's retweets allowed Ibrahim to give shape to what many distant audiences potentially experienced as a nameless mass that took to the streets in protest of Hosni Mubarak. As Ibrahim retweeted texts by active audience members in Egypt and around the world, she gave name to community members that were actively creating the transnational spaces of activism that the hashtag had opened up to them. For example, on the second day of the protests Ibrahim retweeted a tweet that reflected the various layers of both digital and local communities working across the streets of Egypt during the protests and sharing information about this work across Twitter: "R u serious? RT @[username]: What?! RT @[username] BEWARE: Snipers on rooftops via @[username] #Jan25 #Egypt." After being posted by the original author, this tweet was then retweeted and responded to by three others, including Gigi Ibrahim. At the same time this tweet is sharing valuable information, it is also making explicit for distant audiences the complex networks that formed across digital and physical spaces of the revolution to sustain the protests. In making these networks explicit to her audiences, Ibrahim contracts the expansive spaces opened through her use of the hashtag and invites disidentifications that again distance viewers of the revolution who may be coopting the knowledge shared by Ibrahim to further bolster Western identities at the expense of non-Western protestors, reiterating what Said has referred to as an "us" and a "them."

These tweets with the @user syntax made the large communities of active participants in the revolution visible across Twitter and highlighted a community that many of Ibrahim's followers and readers were not part of. Thus, while Ibrahim and others invited an expansion of this transnational space of activism through their use of the hashtag, their use of the @user syntax reiterated the distances that separated many in this audience from events unfolding on the ground and qualified the identifications that she was forming elsewhere. This rhetorical highlighting of division, a division that cannot simply be overcome through identification, enabled Ibrahim to reiterate the distance between her lived realities and those of many audience members that Twitter's digital interface sought to elide.

## **Conclusion**

The work of Ibrahim highlights the complex affordances and constraints that shape activists' work across social media interfaces such as Twitter. Although Twitter's interface was designed so that users could just "type something and send it" (Sagolla, 2012), successful transnational activists find themselves doing much more than this in their computer mediated communication with both local and global audiences. This examination of Ibrahim's tweets highlights that, while we generally focus on interfaces in terms of design and supplementary hardware, we also need to attend to the kinds of texts and the roles that discursive elements such as @user syntax and hashtag are playing in the shaping of interfaces by users. Through her use of the hashtag and the @user syntax, Ibrahim was able to negotiate the affordances and constraints of Twitter's interface. In doing so, Ibrahim's tweets demonstrate that discursive economies such as that of Twitter are powerful mechanisms that enable the transformation of computer mediated communication into action, specifically the building and maintaining of communication infrastructures of protest.

This exploration of Ibrahim's tweets also highlights the complexities of transnational communities that rally support across social media interfaces. These communities of support are sustained by both the identifications that dissolve boundaries among members as well as disidentifications through which activists reiterate and redraw boundaries in global contexts. Across her tweets, Ibrahim is

often, as we have seen, doing both at once – inviting new audiences to join a broader digital space of activism while she is qualifying their membership and (re)articulating the boundaries of transnational digital spaces through her use of the @user syntax. Gloria Anzaldúa grapples with the seeming contradictions of this dynamic in her meditation on reflections in a mirror: “dark dumb windowless no moon glides / across the stone the night sky alone alone / no light just mirror walls obsidian smoky in the mirror she sees a woman with four heads” (1987, p. 63).

As Anzaldúa looks into the obsidian mirror, the identifications that she had seemingly built with those around her begin to fracture and dissolve: she sees “Gloria, her everyday face”; “Prieta and Prietita,” her childhood faces; “Gaudi,” the face that her family knew; and lastly, a stranger’s face. Here, as Anzaldúa considers the mirror, her identifications with others are at once affirmed and fractured when they are placed in context with the many relationships that characterize her life. This fracturing within the mirror, however, is productive for Anzaldúa, as it was for Ibrahim and other activists. As Anzaldúa looks into the mirror she is both “[s]eeing and being seen. Subject and object” (1967, p. 64). Similarly, through her weaving together of identifications and disidentifications Ibrahim, like her distant audiences, is both seeing and being seen in the dynamically negotiated relationships that she built with both local and global audiences within the transnational context of the revolution. ■

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