

International Conference

Media, Technologies, Cooperation – Rethinking publics and publicness in the MENA region.

December 6th–8th 2018

Siegen University

The conference is jointly organized by the Collaborative Research Center 1187 Media of Cooperation Project “Digital publics and societal transformation in the Maghreb”, the Institute for Information Systems and School of Media and Information (iSchool) at Siegen University, and the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology and the a.r.t.e.s. Graduate School at the University of Cologne.

Since the so-called ‘Arab spring’ in 2011 questions about the relationship between media technology, political participation, and processes of transformation in the MENA region have increasingly come to the fore within the field of anthropology as well as in the neighboring disciplines of human-computer interaction (HCI) and information system studies. In bringing together scholars working in Arab-majority societies from design studies and socio-informatics with ethnographers from cultural and social anthropology we are aiming at opening up new paths and multidisciplinary perspectives in the collaborative study of media. Moreover, this transdisciplinary collaboration promises to advance both – our study of technology by looking more closely at society, and our study of society by looking more closely at technology.

Since the path-breaking volume *Media Worlds* (Ginsburg/Abu-Lughod/Larkin 2002) the notion of media has radically changed through the advent of new information and communication technology and social media. Thinking about media has thus to zoom in on situated media practices and varieties of mediation (cf. Mazzarella 2004). Additionally, the infrastructures, which produce and surround them, must be taken into account. Infrastructures need to be managed and controlled and point to the inseparable connection of media and technology, on the one, and socio-political practice on the other hand (cf. Larkin 2008, 2013). But not only is society – freely adapted from Latour – technology made durable, at the same time, new media technologies restructure existing social orders and institutional arrangements. In recent years, they have triggered new demands for participation, testing institutions and remaking (b)orders in the MENA region. In this process, new forms of publics and publicness are emerging, raising aspirations and anxieties about scale and scope of media practices and challenging previous assumptions and conceptualizations of the public sphere – in the Islamic world and beyond (cf. Eickelman/Anderson 2003; Hirschkind/De Abreu/Caduff 2017).

In the HCI domain, a series of studies on social media use during the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ were published during the last 5 Years (Lotan et al. 2011; Starbird/Palen 2012; Al-Ani et al. 2012; Kavanaugh et al. 2012). These studies describe aspects of the use of social media, mainly of blogging and micro-blogging sites, such as Twitter, during the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia. Addressing the interchange between social media use and political practices of civil society activists, Wulf et al. (2013a) investigated how social media use supported political activists ‘on the ground’ in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, and analyzed Facebook communication of Palestine activists fighting against the Israeli wall (Wulf et al. 2013b).

We invite contributions, which explore the materialities and socialities of changing (communities of) practice – revolving around changing media use, (im)possibilities of cooperation and new concerns for the publicness and scale of social interaction. We welcome reflections on the methodological challenges of and theoretical implications for media-ethnographies, which focus on new forms of (mediated) cooperation – we propose to understand, in the context of our Collaborative Research Center, as the ‘joint production of means, processes and objectives of interaction’. We aim at bringing together ethnographic explorations of situated media practices, emerging controversies, and their (transforming) publics in both, cultural and social anthropology as well as human-computer interaction/information system studies.

Research questions and topics for the conference may revolve around:

- Media and political participation;
- New forms of institutional arrangements, norms, and orders through new media networks and practices;
- Changing controversies on media technology and social media use (re-)shaping social relations – e.g. in regard to love and friendship, religion, work collaborations, education, custom and folklore;
- Reflections on the genealogy, use and politics of the notions of publics, public spheres and publicness in North-African and Middle Eastern settings;
- Questions of scale and scaling;
- Emerging issues and issue-networks that may or may not spark a public into being;
- Inclusion and exclusion; empowerment through new media technology vs. demarcation and exclusion;
- Political participation and the use of new media; or: How to win a public?
- Use of new media technology in political struggle, e.g. activism, social movements, recognition, identity politics;

The conference language will be English. We are planning to publish the proceedings of the conference. If you are interested to present a paper please send an abstract (200-300 words) to s.holdermann@uni-koeln.de until May 14th 2018.

Important dates:

May 14, 2018 – deadline for the submission of abstracts (200-300 words)

Dec 6-8, 2018 – conference

Apr 26, 2019 – deadline for the submission of revised papers for publication

Organizers: Konstantin Aal (Siegen), Simon Holdermann (Cologne), Markus Rohde (Siegen), Sarah Rüller (Siegen), Volker Wulf (Siegen), Martin Zillinger (Cologne).

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