Challenges of Digital Activism in Saudi Arabia: The case of Raif Badawi

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Abstract
The digital world is not as a universally free space as we might think. For instance, expressing one’s beliefs and calling for freedom of religions might not only be deemed as disturbing cultures, status quo, politics and religions, but also considered as a criminal offence. Thus, in this paper, I argue that the role of digital civics researchers and practitioners is more challenging as they do not only have to design and build technical solutions for activism but also to ensure activists safety when applying these solutions.

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Digital activism, social justice, freedom, social media, digitalcivics

ACM Classification Keywords
K.4.1 Public Policy Issues

Introduction
In the past few years, more citizens have opted for the online platforms where they can be active members in changing their cultures and communities. Activists, in particular, have made use of the digital world to practice their activism online, in order to have their voices heard and to reach a wider range of audience. Although this “online activism” might have been
successful in some contexts, it is not in others. The
digital world is not as a universally free space as we
might think. For instance, expressing one’s beliefs and
calling for freedom of religions might not only be
deemed as disturbing cultures, status quo, politics and
religions, but also considered as a criminal offence [8].
In the light of this, I would like to discuss a case in
Saudi Arabia which represents a series of challenges
that online activists might face when attempting to
praise what they believe is “justice”, whereas it is not
in their communities.

Raif Badawi
In January 2015, Raif Badawi, a Saudi online activist,
was sentenced to ten years imprisonment and one
thousand lashes [3]. This penalty was for establishing
an online forum called “Saudi liberal network” where he
praised secularism and religious liberty, which are
contradictive views to Islamic beliefs and Saudi culture.
Raif’s wife Insaf Haider, who has been given asylum in
Canada with her three children, has appeared on media
calling on governments and publics to demand Raif’s
release [6]. She has appeared on BBC news pointing
out that Raif had not insulted religions or mocked any
politicians or religious clerics [6]. Yet, what might she,
and Raif, think is ethical, might be unethical or even
illegal in the culture and law under which they
expressed their view. In fact, according to Saudi law,
promoting for atheism is just as criminal offence as
violent terrorism [2]. What is more interesting in this
case, is that the majority of publics in Saudi Arabia
seem to take their stance against Raif and other
activists who are accused of disturbing culture and
disrespecting Islam. According to a leaked YouTube
video of flogging Raif in public, people were clapping and
seemed happy to see him flogged [4]. Surprisingly, this
majority includes close family members to the activist
such as his father “Muhammed Badawi” who has
appeared on social media accusing his son and his son
in law “Raif’s lawyer” Waleed Abu Elkhair of being
atheists. Thus he requested the court to divorce his
daughter “Samar Badawi” from her husband, and that
resulted in divorcing her “by force”. In his account on
Twitter, the father tweeted “Thank God, Samar is now
divorced from the atheist spy Waleed Abu Elkhair” [7].
On the other hand, there is a minority of publics who
advocate Raif’s call for freedom of religions, but the
fear of being accused of disrespecting Islam or being
arrested for a minor word they might say makes it
challenging to disclose their identities or their views.

Risks of online activism

This fear of being in trouble, however, has not stopped
some activists who believe that disclosing their
identities is an essential part of being an activist.
Wajeha Alhuwaider, a Saudi activist, has stated that it
is a part of being activists to disclose our identities
even though many activists in Saudi Arabia are using
Nicknames and sometimes computer software to
change IP addresses to avoid being tracked [5].
However, even when anonymously using digital media,
it does not necessarily block the authority from
tracking. In fact, it is common in Saudi Arabia for
activists to be arrested by tracking their activities
online. This is due the to the Saudi regulations that
control online content; For instance, YouTube videos
made in Saudi Arabia are monitored and some websites
and social media accounts are blocked [2]. Also,
circulating blocked content in any form is considered to
be a cyber crime; and all blogs, forums, chat rooms are
required to obtain a license from the Ministry of Culture and Information [2]. As a result, websites owners have to self-regulate the content added to their websites to avoid being arrested or having their websites blocked [2]. Therefore, it is evident that anonymity is not guaranteed in online world. That is due to the lack of freedom in digital media which limits the freedom of thoughts. According to Eban Moglin, freedom of thought requires freedom of media, as he explained in FOSDOM conference.

Where he announced that he was working with his colleagues on a project called “freedom box” which is a smart router that connects the user to the net without going through mediators [1].

This sounds quite promising. However, such a technical solution might take a decade or more to be completely developed and deployed, despite other limitations it may pose. Thus it is crucial now to define free approaches, especially for online activism, in order to ensure users freedom and safety.

Conclusion

So Here, The role of digital civics researchers and practitioners is more challenging as it is not only having to design and build technical solutions for activism but also to ensure activists safety when applying these solutions. To conclude, it was evident from the previous cases, that the risks of being an online activist could be intimidating, and the cost could span from carrying a bad reputation to a death penalty. The case of Raif Badawi highlighted the limited freedom in the the online world due to religious, social or political barriers which should be taken in consideration by digital civics researchers.

Finally, in order to support online activism, we also need to think of how to overcome cultural and political barriers for activists, and how to help them use digital media to build a rapport between their activism and the social milieu they are active in.

References
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