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PARADOXES OF VISIBILITY IN ACTIVISM: THE INTERPLAY OF ONLINE POWER DYNAMICS BETWEEN ACTIVISTS AND THE STATE IN THE EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION

Research full-length paper

General Track

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Abstract

Social Media has allowed activists to make their causes visible and network locally and transnationally with supporters, but posed equal threats to activists, as authoritarian states employ repressive surveillance measures. This paper explores the struggle between the state and activists for visibility on social media platforms, and conceptualises the paradoxes of visibility in daily practices in both sides. This is done by researching grassroots human rights groups from the Egyptian revolution, and therefore contributing to the narrative that social media has presented as many challenges as opportunities to activism, because the same tools that are used to leverage activism are also used strategically by the state to suppress activism.

Keywords: Visibility, paradoxes, activism, surveillance, Egyptian revolution, Arab Spring

1. Introduction

As much as information and communication technologies (ICTs) enable activism, which can eventually result in enhancing democracy (Hier & Greenberg, 2009), by allowing social movements to reach out to, and engage with, wider networks for mobilisation and attention (Tufekci, 2013), ICTs also enable repressive surveillance and monitoring practices for regimes, which pose a threat to activists (Hier & Greenberg, 2009; della Porta, 2013; Hosein & Nyst, 2013). Surveillance is defined as “a policing tactic which aims to quell or weaken political activity” (Starr *et al.*, 2011, p.73), in order to gather information about social movements, and inhibit them from accomplishing their plans (Starr *et al.*, 2011).

In Egypt, protests erupted against longstanding dictatorship since 2011, in what became known as the Arab Spring. It is claimed that social media has played an essential role in the Egyptian revolution, where the numbers of social media users on different platforms have increased dramatically during that period (Harindranath *et al.*, 2015). For example, there were 4.1M users on Facebook in 2010, and in 2013 the number has reached 13.5M users (Harindranath *et al.*, 2015). But the role of technology in the revolution has not necessarily been positive, since activists have had longstanding evidence that shows the government is monitoring people in many ways, which were made possible through the collaboration of the police with the telecommunication corporations, and through acquisition of surveillance software (Raoof, 2014). As a result, activists have been arrested in 2008 after their call and SMS data has been collected from telecommunication companies (Hosein & Nyst, 2013). When the Egyptian revolution erupted in 2011, authorities also arrested Wael Ghonim; the administrator of the famous Facebook page “We Are All Khaled Said”, which operated anonymously then and campaigned against police brutality and was considered one of the major online platforms in organising the protests (BBC, 2011). Egyptian authorities continued to crackdown on administrators of opposition Facebook pages (Michael, 2014). Journalists, bloggers and other citizens have also been arrested or referred to investigation over their views on social media (Amnesty International, 2014; Michael, 2014; Sakr, 2016). This state surveillance and monitoring is considered an issue beyond the violation of privacy of individuals, as it is more of a fundamental result of political power (Stalder, 2002).

Despite all this, social media has often been praised in the literature about the Arab Spring and social movements, where it has been considered the main enabler of the revolution, and the media created a hype about a “Facebook revolution” (Aouragh & Alexander, 2011), and a “liberation technology” (Chenoweth, 2016). However, social media is not a neutral tool (Lim, 2012), and the context is often overlooked when technology is championed in the Arab Spring, which is considered “a gold rush for the surveillance industry - used to crack down on protesters” (Bahrain Human Rights, 2017, no pagination). The Egyptian government even intensifies its crackdown further by even blocking some social media platforms (Hamama, 2017).

Therefore, the same tools that are used to leverage activism, network and spread online posts and news virally can also present considerable challenges to activists; a topic which has been understudied in the literature, in comparison to opportunities presented by these tools. Therefore, it is integral to study how social media spaces are transformed into an arena of power interplay between activists and the state, where activists are leveraging these tools to help their causes, while dictators are using the same tools to impose control. In a sense, technology has been paradoxical, which means that “a certain technology applied in a certain way in a certain context may have consequences or implications of one kind, and may necessarily and at once be implicated in a contrary set of consequences or implications” (Arnold, 2003, p.231-232). The paradox concept is therefore used to analyse tensions and challenges (Zheng *et al.*, 2011) in the context of technological tools that present the two conflicting sides, activists and the state, with different opportunities that have opposite consequences.

While abundance of research documents surveillance by authoritarian regimes, little has been done to research activists' daily practices and how they handle being monitored. This paper discusses how there is a constant interplay of power on social media between activists and the state. Even though activists have no choice but media tools to surpass temporal and spatial boundaries (Thompson, 2005) by increasing the information flow from activists to the world, and therefore make regimes' violations visible, these same tools are exactly what threaten the physical and mental wellbeing of activists, because of the imbalance of power to the favour of the state, that not only has advanced surveillance means, but also employs means of media propaganda online.

This paper examines the paradoxical effect of visibility in activism, namely, perceiving visibility as a double-edged sword with contradictory effects (Uldam, 2016; 2017). The perspective of paradoxes allows us to reveal the "tensions, oppositions, and contradictions" (Poole & Van De Ven, 1989, p.562) in the strategies and consequences of visibility and invisibility employed by both activists and the state in the Egyptian revolution and its aftermath, which then contributes to further understanding of the activism dynamics in the Arab Spring. This research aims to show that ICTs have helped suppress activists, who feel they are becoming more visible to the public, while the more powerful state maneuvers this visibility to its favour by using the techniques analysed here, resulting in visibility tension between both activists and the state. It also contributes to our understanding of how activism is hindered by the state and how such practices are performed, and how activism and state control are in constant interplay in online platforms, such that digital activism does not constantly yield results in favour of activist groups. This is particularly important in the context of the Arab Spring, where social media is championed to be the enabler of social change, while in fact, social media afforded different mechanisms of control for the state, to disempower activists, in the same way activists were empowered by the same tools.

The paper will proceed with a literature review, methodology and background information on the groups interviewed in this research, then the analysis presents the paradoxes that exist in visibility between the state and activists, and finally a discussion and conclusion.

2. Literature Review

This section first reviews the concept of visibility and how it is part of Foucault's broader concept of the governmentality of populations, then expands to review surveillant visibility in specific; a key concept to this paper.

2.1 Governmentality and Visibility

In 1978-79 Foucault outlined the concept of governmentality as part of his interest in power, where it is no longer centralised but strategically dispersed in societies. It is an expression of disciplinary power that goes beyond institutions of prison, hospital and asylum in his previous writings (McKinlay & Pezet, 2017). Since governmentality is a broad theory, we will draw upon the concepts that are in the scope of this article.

Government here is a power technique that refers to how people's conduct can be guided in a specific way. It assumes that those who are governed will adjust or resist the governing measures (Lazzarato, 2009; McKinlay & Pezet, 2017). Those who govern attempt to decide the conduct of the governed, and those who are governed will develop counter measures to bypass or diminish being governed, or to be governed differently, or otherwise become self-governed (Lazzarato, 2009).

Foucault labels the strategies to resist as "counter-conducts" (Lazzarato, 2009, p.114), whilst at the same time, governmentality leaves no space for collective action (McKinlay & Pezet, 2017). "Governmentalist strategies develop credible ways to define, monitor and assess a population so that specific types of individuals can be targeted for intervention" (McKinlay & Pezet, 2017, p.4). Brighenti (2010) argues that there is an aspect of visibility in how governmentality is performed, while visibility has been limitedly mentioned in the analysis of governmentality, as Foucault himself only addresses visibility by expressing that close monitoring of subjects acts as a form of discipline (Tazzioli & Walters, 2016). Foucault did not consider the counter uses of visibility by subjects, even though he argued that exercising power always faces resistance from subjects (Tazzioli & Walters, 2016).

Morevoer, Tazzioli and Walters (2016) argue that visibility in governmentality is not merely about putting subjects under surveillance, but rather gaining knowledge about them, so that they can be governed. They further suggest considering visibility as a critical area of struggle and not just a technique of discipline, as Foucault did, because if visibility can be considered as "practices of knowledge" (p.448) that expose certain subjects while concealing others, then it can therefore be argued that visibility can also be used by the subjects in a reversible way. Therefore, visibility should not be perceived only as a practice of unidirectional surveillance, but as a complex system, where many practices of visibility contradict and oppose each other (Tazzioli & Walters, 2016).

To theorise visibility, Brighenti (2010) broadly describes it in three types: recognition, control and spectacle. The visibility of recognition is related to social representation, and how people are recognised in the society. In this model, visibility grants power and emancipation to populations, like minorities for example, so groups of people strive to be noticed and affirmed.

Visibility of control is the opposite premise of the visibility of recognition, as the former is concerned with how authorities perform control in secrecy. Foucault (1977) has conceptualised visibility of control in disciplinary societies through the Panopticon model, where more visibility means less power for prison inmates, who do not seek to be visible but are forced to. Inmates' awareness of being constantly visible determines their submission for discipline, which affects their behaviour. In modern days, visibility of control is practiced through surveillance technologies.

The third type is the visibility of the spectacle; where objects and characters are advertised as a means of "discipline, control and standardisation of the masses" (Brighenti, 2010, p. 49). This type of visibility determines what events are made visible, and what not, to give populations certain feelings about those events. It is a media type of visibility, where certain people and actions are made visible, receive attention, and given certain media narratives (Tazzioli & Walters, 2016).

In order to analyse power and visibility, it is useful to examine the interactions between these types of visibility, instead of analysing each individual type (Tazzioli & Walters, 2016), which is what this paper aims to do. This is because if visibility can be considered a complex field with different practices around exposing or concealing knowledge, then the three modes of visibility from Brighenti (2010) do not necessarily explain all the dynamics, interactions and tensions around visibility, especially with regards to activism, where there is constant top-down and bottom-up resistance between authoritarian states and activists.

2.2 Surveillant Visibility

In the context of social movements, the cyberspace has manifested itself into a powerful surveillance arena; it is "the ultimate tool for repression and the nightmare of totalitarian societies in which not only everything is watched and recorded but any action considered out of the normal is a reason for investigation" (Jordan, 1999, p.199-200). Surveillance is broadly about obtaining and analysing information about targeted subjects (Brighenti, 2010), and Lyon (2002) conceptualises surveillance as a way of making subjects' identities and conduct visible, which turns visibility into a social and political concern.

Surveillance establishes asymmetries of visibility, meaning that certain actors like the state can employ surveillance means for citizens without the state being seen, and therefore making subjects feel suspected, so they become self-disciplined (Brighenti, 2010). The exercisers of power can therefore control subjects using surveillance, instead of direct force (Uldam, 2017). There is also another asymmetry between those who recognise that the monitoring apparatus exists, and those who do not (Brighenti, 2010), because details about what exactly is being watched and why are hidden, which spreads uncertainty among subjects (Uldam, 2017).

In the context of activism, when activists are aware or scared of surveillance, social movements may be forced to exert effort to defend themselves, and are, therefore, possibly driven away from their main objectives (Starr *et al*., 2011). Activists may also respond to surveillance by employing more individual undercover forms of resistance, instead of a more apparent collective action (Starr *et al*., 2011). States can also use their financial resources to increase their visibility, and therefore, gain more advantages over the civil society that lacks such resources and funds (Fuchs *et al*., 2012). This way, visibility acts as empowering and disempowering citizens at the same time. For example, social media empowers actors with the ability to be seen by the public because platforms are easily accessed and widely available to use. On the other hand, the asymmetrical way social media visibility operates enables governments to monitor online activity without users knowing (Uldam, 2017).

However, surveillance is not only about watching, but also tracking people and information related to them (Brighenti, 2010). It is no longer centred with the government but distributed in the society. Haggerty and Ericson (2000) suggest that Foucault's conceptualisation does not take into consideration modern surveillance technologies, which force us to revisit the Panopticon analogy. Therefore, they suggest the idea of a networked "surveillant assemblage", which departs from the Panopticon's central top down visibility, towards a more complex pervasive system, where there is an assemblage of objects, people, knowledge, institutions and processes functioning together. Haggerty and Ericson (2000) further argue that by understanding surveillance in the form of assemblages, we are able to see the rise of surveillance as "multiple, unstable and lacks discernible boundaries or responsible governmental departments" (p.609), since this assemblage cannot be tackled by blocking certain technologies or by condemning a certain institution; surveillance is more dispersed and multi-directional. Understanding surveillance in that manner helps us analyse how actors develop different strategies of visibility (Brighenti, 2010).

The other reason why the Panopticon model is unsuitable for modern day analysis of power and visibility is that it completely overlooks the role of technology that visibilises those who exercise power to the public, as opposed to the Panopticon that visibilises the public to those in power; and therefore, political leaders are now exposed to the public (Thompson, 2005). The power of technological development also lies in the ability of rendering events or actions visible by recording and transmitting them, which makes people able to surpass spatial and temporal settings by being able to witness events that take place at different places and times (Thompson, 2005).

Therefore, surveillance operates in a world of information flows (Castells, 1996; Thompson, 2005), where there is a struggle for the visibility of content, as different individuals strive to make themselves seen, or to expose others (Thompson, 2005). Nevertheless, visibility is not only a way of highlighting different social and political aspects of life, as it has become more of an arena in which "social and political struggles are articulated and carried out" (Thompson, 2005, p.49).

This research therefore follows the argument by Uldam (2016, 2017), that social media visibility is potentially challenging, rather than merely empowering, for activism. She has researched corporate monitoring of activists and presented the struggle between corporates and activists for visibility, analysing this through two of Brighenti's concepts of visibility: the visibility of recognition, manifested in the empowering potential of social media to activists, versus the visibility of control, manifested in the disempowering potential of corporates' surveillance to activists. Nevertheless, this paper will expand on the paradoxes of all three types of visibility defined by Brighenti (2010), conceptualising it as tensions between two opposite parties; paradoxes in an arena of constant interplay of power, and asymmetrical visibility.

3. Methodology

The protests in Egypt witnessed a lot of violence, so protesters were arrested and faced trials, or injured and sometimes killed. This has given rise to different human rights groups from the grassroots to campaign for victims and provide them with support, and promote their activism to be acknowledged widely in and outside Egypt. These groups used Facebook groups or online mailing lists to organise their activities and relied on no funding or any formal structure in terms of leadership and spokespersons. This research focuses on 8 groups working in a wide range of activities. Two groups operated in in both Cairo and Alexandria have been counted as four because activism was organised with different dynamics in each of them. Table 1 offers an anonymous summary of the groups' scope of work. All groups operated in Egypt starting from 2011, when the revolution started, and afterwards, except Group5, which formed in 2008, then revived immensely as violations intensified in 2011. Researching these groups gives insights on daily practices of activists rather than the overall social media dynamics about the Arab Spring, which has been widely researched.

Members of these groups acknowledge that most, if not all, of these groups' communication, task delegation and scheduling is carried out via social media platforms. The online space has made it possible for these groups to be founded, and online communication is the most important method to share latest news and updates among members, and those who are offline for any reason (like wanting to take a break off social media, or unable to financially buy a smart phone) were not regularly updated with their group's activities and plans.

Group	Cause	Date Founded
1	Crowdsourcing medical supplies to field hospitals in places of protests, as protesters were injured.	2011
2	Providing legal assistance for people unjustly trialed and detained, operating in Cairo. Activity includes: publishing video and text testimonials from detainees' families, connecting them with volunteer lawyers, and conducting media interviews, among other campaigning efforts.	2011
3	A branch of Group 2, operating in Alexandria.	2011
4	Rescuing and assisting victims of sexual assaults during protests in Cairo, in order to empower women to protest.	2012
5	Lawyers based in Cairo, providing legal assistance to protesters if they are arrested	2008
6	Same as Group 5, but based in Alexandria.	2013

7	Advocating for and providing assistance to political prisoners and their families.	2013
8	Refugees support group in Alexandria: providing subsistence and legal assistance if they are detained.	2014

Table 1: Summary of Groups in this Research

The selection of groups relied on the immense impact created by these groups, as well as the publicity they received internationally, yet, the dynamics of these groups were not researched in-depth, and media or research articles often considered these groups as part of the wider protest activity in Egypt. Nevertheless, being informed by observations of the online groups' public social media channels since 2011, there were frequent details that sparked interest around how these groups' members face violations for their activism through being arrested and facing trials, and also sometimes their reduced activities at times of greater crackdown. Therefore, to understand members' interpretation of events, semi-structured interviews have been done with them: 17 interviewees were females, and 13 were males, and many volunteered in more than one group. 26 interviews were done face-to-face and 4 were done via Skype. Appendix A summarizes the Interviewees' affiliations and interviews' durations. The selection of members to be interviewed was based on having people with a variety of roles, experiences, and activity levels. For example, some interviewees were more active than others, and some were prominent activists since before the revolution, while others were less experienced. Their roles in their groups varied, sometimes based on their professions, as some were lawyers, media professionals, or something else.

Interviews' length ranged from 43 minutes to 2 hours, and had an average of 1 hour 19 minutes. They were conducted in Arabic, or English, if chosen by the interviewees. Files were encrypted and the text was transcribed and translated to English. Analysis was done thematically, using abductive coding on NVivo 11, to produce a list of hierarchical nodes around surveillance at first. After iterating between the literature and the data, the relevant data was recoded and arranged under the visibility concepts. The 3 clear-cut types of visibility did not cover the rich material and examples set out by interviewees, which led to the emerging results in the following discussion.

4. Visibility Paradoxes

The richness of data obtained from the fieldwork in Egypt shows that visibility practices and dynamics cannot be simply classified as either recognition, control or spectacle, and that it is essential to problematise visibility deeper. This paper reinterprets and enriches Brighenti's visibility types under three paradoxes, to capture the rising tension between two parties who resist and fight each other's knowledge, existence and practices, through visibility, in the light of the case of activism in Egypt. The first two paradoxes uncover the tensions between the three types, in the way visibility is manifested in the movements, and in the response to these movements and counter movements. The final paradox is an internal tension among activists that arises as a consequence of the visibility of control.

4.1 Visibility as Empowerment versus Vulnerability

For activism, writing public posts online or making public appearances is needed to make the public recognise campaigns, and call for action for causes. For example, writing live tweets in Egypt is an important way of reporting from any protest or event. When prominent activists adopt certain causes, these causes are automatically promoted in the eyes of the public, who trust the prominent figures of activism. Therefore, being public is important for activists to give credibility to the news they share, and gain the public's trust, as well as transfer online news transnationally to the world.

It can therefore be considered that social media has made human rights groups visible to, and empowered, different parties, under Brighenti's visibility of recognition concept. First, the groups in this research were made visible to people who wanted to help with the groups' work. These volunteers were empowered to participate in a social movement when the founders reached out to the public. For example, one of these groups was formed because the founder tweeted asking people if anyone is interested to help, they can gather in a certain place at a certain time. Second, the groups were made visible to victims and their families, who needed support, and were empowered by reaching out to groups, via social media or the groups' hotlines. Third, the groups made a massive impact through social media such that they became visible to traditional media, which eventually made the groups visible to a wider audience of the population who are not necessarily using social media. A group's founder mentioned that if it hadn't been for social media, "we wouldn't have been able to appear on TV, people wouldn't have hosted us or felt forced to host us so that we could talk about the cause". Therefore, social media enabled groups to enforce a narrative of human rights on traditional media, which resulted in making the state's violations visible to the people, and eventually disempowering it. Fourth, social media has made the groups visible to transnational activists and organisations. Through translation and dissemination of information online in written and video forms, the global community has recognised the violations, and many activists were awarded prestigious human rights awards, and hosted in events worldwide, which eventually empowered activists once targeted by the state.

The techniques that the groups used to make themselves visible were many. They published victims' testimonials, empowering them by making their stories reach a wider audience, and maintained official accounts on at least Facebook, Twitter, and sometimes YouTube. They used branding and marketing techniques for their causes (Poell *et al.*, 2016), and specially designed catchy logos that were used as profile and cover photos on social media, as well as printed as stickers that activists, and those who sympathise with the cause, used as a symbol of making the cause visible, such that those who do not know about it ask and become more aware. Moreover, some activists seek being individually visible by asking their groups' Facebook pages' administrators to identify them by name on social media, that X or Y are the lawyers following up on a specific human rights case, and that they belong to these groups. Therefore, activists sometimes like have their work visible, recognised and promoted, and take pride in being part of their groups.

However, many other activists choose to hide their identities and activities, in order to protect themselves from being vulnerable to the state if all group members are identified. This is because as activists' recognition increases, the state's persecution to them also increases. A group administrator said that "there is the worry of being spied on, or the admins being found out and then [arrested], there has been a lot of worry about this recently…because the group has been targeted and people even appeared on TV attacking us. So there is that worry that they find out who the admins are, and that we end up being more directly in the line of fire… We are thinking that we need to use more secure means, that we don't enter the group's page directly from any of our private profiles, that we use [a tool] that prevents anyone from pinpointing our location. We currently don't open [the group's Facebook page] inbox at all."

There is a significant risk that activists face, because the state keeps a close eye on what is published online, and therefore, has persecuted many activists over what they posted on social media. As a result, many activists had law suits because of Facebook posts, while others were demanded to remove Facebook posts they had written about human rights victims. Another example was when an activist posted about a case over Facebook and went into a police station to try to enquire about the detainees, he was told by the officer that they saw what the activist had just written on Facebook. One interviewee said about her group "I think the main issue [that technology introduced] was being constantly aware of security breaches and that the person in charge of the page or responsible for any vital role sacrifices or risks their personal life... At some point those working on vital issues in the group were at risk of legal persecution, and they were the ones with admin access to the group."

Therefore, the same social dynamics that grant visibility to groups and victims, also make activists vulnerable, as their freedom of speech and expression, and safety are directly limited by the state. As this persecution increases, activists also try to gain more visibility in order to gain solidarity nationally and transnationally, which can protect them in case they are arrested or imprisoned. This way, visibility of activists presents an obstacle to the state once a prominent figure is imprisoned. The state also imposes control through direct force, which eventually instills fear in activists. In one incident, security forces created control by confiscating an activist's laptops and arresting him from his home, and immediately, a group that was logged on from his computer was hacked, leaving all administrators with no control over their group's public Facebook page.

It is evident that surveillance, through the Panopticon effect over activists, was not the only means to hinder activism in Egypt. The Panopticon concept alone was not enough to show authoritarian state control over online platforms, because control over activists' visibility extended to dangerous risks like imprisonment. There is a constant power struggle that takes place through social media between activists and the state, where the state wants activists to know that all actions are monitored, while activists, who have the feeling that the state knows everything, also want to be empowered, so they work on gaining more visibility to promote causes and raise solidarity.

4.2 Visibility as Discourse versus Counter-Discourse

Authoritarian regimes use social media as a tool to balance the power of dissent and provide a counter argument to activists'. For example, the Egyptian regime systematically hijacked the comments on We Are All Khaled Said Facebook page, in order to create counterpropaganda to the protests in the early days of the Egyptian revolution (Poell *et al*., 2016).

Moreover, according to Abdelsaboor (2014), statistics have shown that Egypt has one of the highest number of fake social media accounts worldwide. These accounts are used for hacking purposes and increasing number of fans for certain pages. During the Arab Spring, these accounts have spread and have been called the Electronic Committees, and aim to influence or deceive the public's opinions. These committees are formed by recruiting people to form a counter online movement that works in a systematic way to affect the public and fool them into believing in a certain discourse, or also to confuse opposition groups. These committees mainly seek mobilising people towards an idea or a person, and defaming opposition figures, by spreading false news or rumours about people and organisations. Such committees have spread for two reasons; first, the absence of professional media outlets that people can believe since the state controls all information and news on traditional media outlets, and second because people have found a new free outlet for exchanging unbiased news on social media, which did not exist before. The effect of propaganda produced by these electronic committees has been considerable, and opposition movements also must confront them if they want to spread their ideas as well. Because of their organization and training, these committees have become more of an industry that helps the regime and its supporters (Abbas, 2014).

Groups in the scope of this research also experienced the existence of pro-regime electronic committees who struggle to be visible by posting social media content in a systematic way, showing their support for the state. In their interviews, activists were unsure whether these accounts are fake, bots or real users. There were images leaked off a closed Facebook group that contains an organised pro-regime group of people, who were agreeing about the posts they need to publish to support the state and argue against activists. There is limited information on whether these groups are doing this as a paid work or voluntarily, but indeed the president once mentioned in one of his talks that he can now "create a story in Egypt through one or more of these social networks' battalions" (ON Ent, 2016), in a context where he warned his audience not to rely on information on social media, mentioning that this could be dangerous.

On the other hand, groups in the scope of this research have been creative and widely acknowledged for their use of social media, allowing for "unanticipated forms of visibility" (Trottier & Lyon, 2012, p.93). One of the visibility techniques groups in this research used to counter the regime's propaganda was creating an online protest, where they invited users via a Facebook event to continuously write comments, during a certain time the group specified, about violations on all social media pages run by the state. This has afforded the group visibility when street protests were not an option at all, and the first time this idea was implemented, it went viral and attracted attention from international media for the thousands of comments posted by users to flood the official state Facebook pages. It showed how visibility can be used to bypass crackdown, and therefore provide a way to present violations as a spectacle, to gain recognition for movements.

In addition, instant communication and insignificant distance are afforded by the technological tools that activists use, in order to make regimes visible, so regimes can no longer hide from the public and their actions can be instantly taped and leaked (Thompson, 2005), like what happened with Khaled Saeed, a young man killed by the police and his image stirred the public and later became a symbol for the Egyptian revolution. Social media has turned the story of Khaled Saeed into an extremely "visible" spectacle, which was marketed to stir grievances and encourage people to take action (Powell *et al*., 2016), and the same applies to groups in this research. They used social media to make a spectacle of the regime's violations to transnational audience, by posting and translating victims' testimonials on social media, in an attempt to pressure the regime to stop such violations.

If activism is about framing a discourse and spreading knowledge about regime's violations, the state also tries to invalidate the activists' account of violations online, so there is a clear struggle between activists and the state over whose discourse is spread more on social media. Both sides use the same tools to market their discourses. Moreover, as activists use violations as spectacles to call for people to take action, the state also uses the visibility of certain spectacles to defame activists through traditional or social media. For example, the state has leaked activists' private footage online, and attacked groups on traditional media, which are more widespread than social media, and this propaganda caused activists to become at risk: "[the group] has been targeted recently and people even appeared on TV attacking us. So there is that worry about, or that they find out who the admins are, and that we end up being more directly in the line of fire…people started asking publicly who the admins of the group are. That's the main problem now, the security problem".

Social media then becomes a space for overwhelming amount of contradictory narratives, and it becomes up to the audience to choose which side to believe, but in the end, the process of finding a credible discourse online by a neutral reader, who is not biased towards either side, becomes increasingly difficult. With time, there is an increasing threat that the public starts believing state's discourse over activists', because the state is able to systematically create a higher visibility for itself through propaganda on various online and traditional media channels. And even though activists try to create their own alternative outlet for news or video archiving, these efforts cannot easily survive because activists become emotionally exhausted from being targeted, and the volunteering model for groups does not provide any funds to sustain the groups' work. Because of emotional exhaustion and immense crackdown on activists, many of these groups are not currently operating anymore.

The full power and control over media and financial resources that the state has eventually affords it with more visibility over activists. The state is then capable of purchasing its own visibility (Fuchs *et al.*, 2012), through mechanisms like the electronic committees. The situation can be viewed as "a dance between those who challenge authority, speak true to power, and hope for a more just world and those who wish to extend their privilege and power" (Fernandez, 2008. p.171).

4.3 Visibility as Resignation versus Resistance

This paradox is a consequence of Brighenti's visibility of control, where activists' behaviour and internal reactions to the state's surveillance are divided. There was a divide among activists' opinions on whether they should protect themselves from surveillance or resign to it, since they thought it requires a lot of effort. Many of them paid much attention to surveillance in their lives and within their activist groups. For example, some were extremely cautious, that they put their mobile phones completely outside of the room when they hold an important meeting, but others would simply not care to do the same.

Consequently, there was a strong divide in how secret Facebook groups or mailing lists they use to communicate within the group itself should be run. Some activists had a more careful approach and thought that any new volunteers should not be added to these secret online groups unless other members can fully trust them, in case they were informers used by the state to monitor what the group was planning. On the other hand, other activists thought they were not doing anything that they needed to hide, and that "whoever wants to read or see what we are doing is more than welcome". They thought that paying attention to surveillance can be a "paranoid behaviour" that will distract them from the actual cause they were working on, because it meant they cannot expand by adding new members, despite being aware that they could be monitored by the state through untrusted personnel or surveillance equipment. But it was also part of some activists' ideology that they should deal with the state "as though you have nothing to hide, you behave as though your public work is in fact public, and you only hide something to protect victims".

While other activists did agree that they have nothing to hide, but still thought that they should resist surveillance as much as they can, by not making their communication information available to be read by untrusted people. One of the members who supported filtering their group from untrusted people said that "maybe part of the bravery is being cautious, so that you are actually capable of achieving what you want to achieve. I didn't feel that that was cowardice, but they did…it's not brave to be thrown into prison when I can avoid it... Maybe it stems from that fact that I am very new to this, and they have been activists for much longer". Therefore, being an activist for many years can be one factor where a person resigns and becomes used to being visible to the public or the state.

Another factor that pushes activists to resign to being visible is the convenience of using user-friendly platforms that everyone uses, like Facebook. Resisting surveillance meant the use of sophisticated technical routines like Virtual Private Networks to mask the identity of groups' Facebook pages' administrators, encrypted instant messaging applications, and using complex passwords for activists' personal accounts and devices. This way, activists attempt to shield some information from the state, but still acknowledge that everything they do is exposed to the state, and that any technical attempts are only to make it harder for the state to know information. Some of these attempts include using encrypted chat applications like Signal, which at a certain point in 2016 was blocked by authorities until an update was issued for the application to bypass the blockage (Farid, 2016).

Even though many activists considered some platforms, like Facebook, unsafe in their opinions because their identity can be exposed through it or their accounts easily hacked, but still had to use it for their group's internal communications, because it was most convenient, user-friendly and had all people using it. An incident that forced an activist to take a more resistive approach to surveillance is when her Facebook account as a group's administrator was hacked, and the hacker instantly posted pro-regime posts under her name, changed the name of the secret activism Facebook group to an insult, and also leaked private conversations from her inbox. The attacker also launched a Twitter attack to insult the activist and took control over her account, which forced her to take a more cautious approach towards surveillance by using protective technical measures and staying off social media for a few weeks, because every time she tried to reclaim her accounts, the attacker tried to hack them again. It was not clear who made the attack, but it created negative propaganda and much fear as a result of surveillance and control.

The asymmetrical aspect of visibility is clear in activists not really knowing when or how much they are being monitored. One group administrator mentioned, "I don't continuously preoccupy myself with that idea [of being watched all the time because of the group's activity], but when something happens I do think that [the group] is the cause. And I do constantly obsess over whether [the state] know who the admins are and they are just letting us, or do they not know the admins yet". Therefore, there is a certain acceptance by some activists that they are visible to the state, as they resign to the idea that they are going to work within this closely monitored space, without sophisticated technical or personal measures for protection, because the nature of activism meant that activists have to go public to present their cause. However, this visibility causes crackdown on activists, which makes them consider actively protecting and resisting the state measures, individually or collectively. But more importantly, the state of uncertainty about surveillance is stressful, as one activist mentioned that "the mental stress of having to tolerate such an alert state all the time was quite tiresome on the members." It is probably why activists resign to being watched and start embracing it in their lives; the asymmetry in visibility is stressful to deal with.

5. Discussion

Visibility can be a choice for some actors, like activists, and this choice varies at different times and political contexts. People choose to be visible when they perceive this as empowering to them or essential to their cause. This is why social movements inherently have to be visible in order to strengthen themselves by enrolling their supporters and marketing their causes. It is a visibility of recognition that such groups need to gain power and be noticed (Brighenti, 2010). As a result, the more visible a movement is, the more cautious their counter-movements (like state authorities) are, in terms of violating people's rights, but also, the more these counter-movements are using power and control to watch and monitor their activist opponents.

Once the political context changes, and the counter-movements become more powerful, social movements start perceiving danger as they become more vulnerable, and less empowered. This causes a divide among movements, and some actors want to continue being visible, to show that they will not be intimidated by their opponents, but some will choose to be invisible, and protect themselves from the potentially powerful crackdown. This creates different strategic modes of visibility: some actors are visible all the time, while some actors choose to be visible at different stages by masking their identities but push their whole movement to be visible instead. This way, social movements strategically manipulate visibility to their advantage by being selective in their modes of visibility according to how they perceive, and decide to deal with, danger.

Nevertheless, the asymmetry in visibility puts actors under uncertainty because they are unable to predict the level to which they are being monitored; similar to Foucault's prison inmates, since actors are not fully aware or certain of being constantly visible. This asymmetry in visibility between activists and the state is deepened due to different reasons. First, the advancement in technology allows expensive complex surveillance systems to be owned by authoritarian regimes, who are financially capable of purchasing such systems, and also potentially hiring personnel to run online propaganda, so they purchase visibility (Fuchs *et al.*, 2012) and consequently, make themselves more visible to promote their own discourse, while performing control by closely monitoring activists' visibility. Second, not all activists are technically knowledgeable about risks and security aspects of platforms, or able to use complex protective means to mask their identities online, so they resign to being visible, and acknowledge that the state simply “knows everything”. Third, secure platforms for communication do not provide the same capabilities that other more popular social media platforms provide, and most users exist on these non-encrypted platforms, which ease communication among activists, but at the same time risk the identity of activists, who want to hide themselves, if their accounts are hacked. This can force activists to resign to visibility, unless a situation happens that makes them start resisting and change their behaviour on online platforms to protect themselves. Fourth, the state, being in control of the telecommunication infrastructure, has started blocking Virtual Private Networks (Egyptian Streets, 2017), and other encrypted services (Farid, 2016), and therefore forcing all communication to be visible and monitored, and leaving the less powerful activists struggling to know how far they are being monitored. This is how asymmetry in visibility can cause stress to activists, causing them to become self-disciplined, by hiding their actions, or changing their behaviours, for example using complex technical methods and encrypted platforms for identity protection. This way, they are dealing with the visibility of control, practiced through technology (Brighenti, 2010), by changing their modes of visibility.

Therefore, the paradoxes of visibility show that it is not a case of one side being either always visible or not, movements go through different modes and practices of visibility, and individuals in one movement can also make different choices about their visibility. The choice to adopt a certain mode of visibility is made according to factors like political context, level of crackdown, activism expertise, and how much monitoring is perceived by individuals. Spectacles also go through the same process of being strategically employed at certain times to achieve outcomes, as activists employ visibility of specific spectacles to the advantage of their causes, while the state also uses activists’ personal spectacles to counter the discourse of activism.

Finally, this paper has shown that social media does not necessarily empower activists (Aouragh & Alexander, 2011; Uldam, 2017), because the paradoxical effect of technology can result in contradictory implications (Arnold, 2003) for social movements. This also contributes to the criticism of social media’s role in the Egyptian Revolution (Wilson & Dunn, 2011), and disciplinary surveillance (Fuchs, 2014), by unpacking the complexity of visibility as an affordance of social media and other ICTs, and how visibility is enacted in complex social and political environments through power struggle, group tension, individual choices and coping mechanisms.

6. Conclusion

This paper goes beyond the conceptualisation of visibility into three individual types, as set by Brighenti (2010) to reinterpret the paradoxes under three types, in order to uncover the power struggle of visibility between activists, who promote their causes and interact on social media on one side, while the state on the other side, manipulates visibility to suppress digital activism, through monitoring and using the online space to market a counter-discourse. The paper proposes to reinterpret visibility into three paradoxes: empowerment versus vulnerability, discourse versus counter-discourse, and resignation versus resistance. These paradoxes highlight the tension in the activism arena between activists and the state, and uncover the way activists deal with and respond to visibility. The limitations of this study is that there is obviously no clear data from the state’s side on surveillance, regarding what exactly is being performed and how. There are further implications of this research that can be considered by the technical activist community, who can work on building new, and supporting the existing, non-corporate non-state controlled platforms that bypass blocking in order to securely support activism.

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Appendix A

Person's acronym	**Type**	**Groups affiliation**	**Position**	**Length**	**Date**
A1	In person	G6 G7	Lawyer and activist (G6 coordinator)	1 hr 21 mins	December 2016
A2	In person	G3 G6 G7	Activist	1 hr 8 mins	December 2016
A3	In person	G6	Lawyer	57 mins	December 2016
A4	In person	G3 G6 G7	Lawyer and activist (G6 coordinator)	1 hr 52 mins	December 2016
A5	In person	G3	Activist (G3 coordinator)	1 hr 50 mins	December 2016
A6	In person	G2 G5	Activist (G2, G5 coordinator)	43 mins	December 2016
A7	In person	G3 G5 G6 G7	Lawyer	1 hr 33 mins	December 2016
A8	In person	G3 G5 G6	Lawyer and activist	1 hr 27 mins	December 2016
A9	In person	G3	Activist	58 mins	December 2016
A10	In person	G2	Activist	1 hr 1 min	January 2017
A11	In person	G2	Activist	1 hr 7 mins	January 2017
A12	In person	G2 G5	Lawyer (G5 coordinator)	57 mins	January 2017
A13	In person	G6 G7	Activist (G7 coordinator)	1 hr 26 mins	January 2017
A14	In person	G2	Activist	1 hr 9 mins	January 2017
A15	In person	G2	Activist	54 mins	January 2017

		G7			
A16	In person	G4	Activist	1 hr 9 mins	January 2017
A17	In person	G2 G5 G7	Activist (G7 coordinator)	1 hr	January 2017
A18	In person	G3 G8	Activist	1 hr 41 mins	January 2017
A19	In person	G6 G8	Activist (G8 coordinator)	1 hr 14 mins	January 2017
A20	In person	G7	G7 coordinator	1 hr 10 minutes	January 2017
A21	In person	G7	Activist and Lawyer	1 hr 11 mins	January 2017
A22	In person	G6	Activist and Lawyer	1 hr 8 mins	January 2017
A23	In person	G2 G8	Activist (G2 coordinator)	2 hr 16 mins	January 2017
A24	In person	G2 G5	Lawyer	1 hr 7 mins	January 2017
A25	In person	G2 G5	Activist (G2 coordinator)	1 hr 10 mins	January 2017
A26	In person	G3 G5 G6 G7 G8	Activist and lawyer (G8 coordinator)	1 hr 38 mins	January 2017
A27	Online video call	G4	G4 coordinator	1 hr 54 mins	February 2017
A28	Online video call	G8	Activist	1 hr 5 mins	February 2017
A29	Online video call	G1	G1 coordinator	1 hr 51 mins	February 2017
A30	Online video call	G1	G1 coordinator	1 hr 36 mins	March 2017

Table 2: Interviewees' affiliations and interviews' durations