MEDIATIZED CULTURAL ACTIVISM

COUNTERPUBLICS IN THE AGE OF MEDIATISATION:
LOCAL RESPONSES TO FEMEN IN THE ARAB WORLD

KAOUTHAR DARMONI AND TAMARA WITSCHGE

ABSTRACT

*In this paper we analyse the impact of the mediatised strategy of the global protest group Femen. In addition to the concept of mediatisation, we employ the concept of counterpublics and find that Femen have limited impact in the Arab world due to a lack of embedment in local communities. We show how mediatisation of protest can hamper the dual function of counterpublic discourse and action. By focusing primarily outwardly and adopting dominant media logics (outwardly focused, **inter**public discourse), Femen's protest strategies result in a sensational and top-down message. This is not embedded in a conversation with local communities (the inwardly focused **intra**public function of counterpublic discourse) and as such results in much resistance in the Arab world. Moving beyond an analysis of Femen's message to include local Arab responses, our analysis allows us insight into the lived experiences of mediatised protest, which suggest that Femen's antagonistic actions foster alienation rather than empowerment.*

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Kaouthar Darmoni *is an Assistant Professor of Gender Media at Media Studies, University of Amsterdam. She studied media and communication and holds a doctoral degree on Tunisian-Arab cinema and gender (University Sorbonne Nouvelle-Paris III/Lumieres-Lyon, France). K. Darmoni is currently working on media, gender and women's emancipation. She is also an international consultant-trainer in the field of women's empowerment and feminine leadership (in the commercial and governmental sectors).*

Tamara Witschge *(PhD University of Amsterdam) is a Rosalind Franklin Fellow at the University of Groningen, Faculty of Arts. Previously she worked at Cardiff University and at Goldsmiths Leverhulme Media Research Centre. Her research critically explores the relation between media and democracy, media pluralism and more recently the rise of 'entrepreneurial journalism'. She is co-author of 'Changing Journalism' (2011, Routledge), and is co-editing the Sage Handbook of Digital Journalism (to be published in 2016).*

Corresponding author
Tamara Witschge
Journalism Studies and Media
University of Groningen
P.O. Box 716
9700AS Groningen
The Netherlands
t.a.c.witschge@rug.nl
http://www.rug.nl/staff/t.a.c.witschge/
+31 (0)50 363 59 50

MEDIATIZED
CULTURAL
ACTIVISM

INTRODUCTION

In this paper we discuss how the global protest group Femen, which constitutes a key example of a mediatised form of protest, has limited impact because their messages are not embedded in local cultures. To understand the impact of the mediatised activities of the feminist group Femen, in addition to the concept of mediatisation, we employ the concept of counterpublics. We argue that mediatisation of protest can hamper the dual function of counterpublic discourse and action. On the one hand, counter publics form spaces for "withdrawal and regroupment", and on the other they "function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics" (Fraser 1992, p. 124). By heavily informing the media strategies of protest groups, mediatisation (understood here as the adopting of protest to dominant media logics) may lead to a foregrounding of the *inter*public discourse (gaining the attention of the general public) over the necessary *intra*public discourse (where common grounds are established). Through an analysis of the reception of Femen's messages, we examine how the local embedment of global mediatised protest is necessary for its sustained impact beyond individual media activities. As such, in this paper we aim to scrutinise the (lack of) lasting impact of mediatised protest on the local experiences of women subject to the mediatised activities of Femen.

In this article we offer insight into the way in which those subject to the mediatised strategy of Femen, Arab women, respond to their message, and as such we gauge the wider impact but particularly also the limitations of mediatised protest. As a key exemplar of mediatised forms of protest, the case of Femen allows us to critique the process of mediatisation by critically interrogating not only how the actions of this protest movement are highly informed by media logics, but also what the mediatised nature of these actions means for their impact. We will discuss how, while employing recognisable activities and messages, the tactics of Femen are easily spread and recognisable, but due to the lack of connection to everyday lives in local contexts, Femen activists are rather viewed as the "unrecognizable other" (see also Reestorff, 2014). Moving beyond the analysis of the content of Femen's media messages, we are able to show how women in the Arab world perceive the top-down media-oriented message as stereotyping, orientalist, derogatory, vulgar and, most importantly, divorced from their everyday realities.

MEDIATISATION OF PROTEST

Even though an agreed-upon definition of mediatisation of politics and protest is lacking, a common understanding, from an institutional perspective is that the concept refers to the phenomenon by which political actors become increasingly governed by media logic (Strömbäck, 2011, p. 425). Media logics increasingly govern other domains of social life and institutions, including the political domain – the logics of media are internalised by

actors in these domains. As an all-encompassing process, political protest falls subject to this process too, and protests are more and more shaped to fit with the media's logic. As such, mediatisation of politics and protest has been described as the process by which media are exerting growing influence over political processes and protest behaviour (Hjarvard, 2008, p. 107). This is not surprising. Media play an important role in voicing opinions and in making "contemporary contests" visible (Couldry, 2010, p. 148), and traditional media are known to employ "rigid formats" (Fairclough in: Chandler, 1997, p. 10), which means that certain types of actors acquire a voice more readily than others. To follow dominant media logics can be seen as a strategy by which to gain as much of the attention of the media as possible.

Though the concept of mediatisation is on the rise, we still know very little about the actual processes of mediatisation, and disagreement exists between the more institution-focused approaches (such as Mazzoleni and Schulz, 2010; Strömback, 2008) and the more cultural perspectives of the process of mediatisation (see Block 2013; Hepp, 2012 – for a discussion of the difference between the two approaches see Couldry and Hepp, 2013; Witschge, 2014). The institutional approach focuses on the interrelation between media institutions and political actors and suggests a more linear view of media effect on society, and puts the notion of media logic at the centre of understanding the media's increased hold on the actions of political actors. The cultural approaches start from the "media's growing role in everyday lives" and view mediatisation theory as a way to capture the "open-ended and nonlinear (as we would now call them) consequences of media as they circulate through our lives" (Couldry and Hepp, 2013, p. 192-3). Rather than media logic as a governing principle, focus is on a contextual understanding of how media "exert a certain 'pressure' on the way we communicate" (Hepp, 2010, p. 41).

There is also disagreement about the status of the theory: Are we describing a normative process when analysing mediatisation, or is it merely an empirical question? Mazzoleni and Schulz (2010, p. 249) suggest that the phenomena is a bad thing, where the "term mediatisation denotes problematic concomitants or consequences of the development of modern mass media". Others argue that the normative question is an empirical one and should not be part of the definition (Strömback, 2008, p. 229). In this view, mediatisation is not necessarily a bad thing, but we need to empirically trace the impact of the process in society. However, to do this is no mean feat. How does one trace something that is thoroughly embedded in society? The definition of mediatisation is that the media shape behaviour outside the domain of media. What is more, we do not know how these mediatised actions then impact on other actions in society.

This article aims to make a contribution towards gauging the impact of mediatised protest, understanding mediatised protest as behaviour that is (more or less) deliberately shaped to get media attention. It focuses on the response to these actions in local communities. Though conceptually we would assume the audience to be central in mediatisation research, it has been given a limited role in mediatisation theory and analysis

(Witschge, 2014). We aim to address this gap in the literature and critically examine how in a particular national context, global, mediatised protest is received, rejected and/or re-appropriated. We use the case of Femen, as their actions can be seen as exemplary of mediatised forms of protest. At the same time there has been a lot of public discussion about their actions, and this allows us insight into the way in which this form of mediatised protest is experienced in local contexts.

MEDIATED AND CREATIVE ACTIVISM: THE CASE OF FEMEN

The Femen movement is a highly instructive case for the analysis of the mediatisation of protest. Femen refers to a "radical" feminist protest group founded in the Ukraine in 2008. It became internationally known for using what they call "sextremism" to protect women's rights. They organise controversial topless protests against patriarchy, religious institutions, sex tourism and dictatorship, and they have had an emphasis on women in the Arab world. An important event in this was in 2012, when, from their headquarters based in Paris, Femen started an international action to support "Amina Tyler" (whose real name is Sboui, which we will use here), a Tunisian activist. On her Facebook page, Amina Sboui posted two pictures of herself topless to protest against the rise of Muslim fundamentalism in her country. The "Commission for the promotion of virtue and prevention of vice" in Tunisia repeatedly asked for Sboui to be stoned to death for her punitively "obscene" actions. Seizing this opportunity to further their anti-religion and anti-Sharia message, the Femen movement declared an "International Topless Jihad Day" on 4 April 2013.

To gain insight into the way in which women in the Arab world responded to Femen's actions and media strategies, we analysed discussions of Femen's tactics, in particular in relation to the actions of Sbiou, in a number of (social) media communities. The discussions we analysed were mostly in Arabic, but some also in French or English. We monitored the Facebook pages, blogs (including activist blogs) and Twitter pages of key players, including: Femmes Tunisiennes Democrates, Movement Feministe Tunisien, Feministes Tunisiennes, Egyptian National Council for Women, Alliance of Arab Women, Egyptian feminist union, Association Solidarité Féminine, Al Bawsala, Nawaat. org, Bnaya Tounsia and Tunileaks. We also followed a number of hashtags on Twitter: #Amina, #aminasboui, #aminatunisie, #jasadimilki (my body belongs to me), #femen-tounes (Femen Tunisia), #toplessjihad, #freewomenTunisia, #musulmaneetfiere (Muslim and proud), #muslimrage. Finally, we included established media debates (including comments from the audience), such as local television debates on Femen: Tunisian satellite TV (Ettounsia, Nessma TV, Hannibal TV, Al Wataniya, Zitouna); global channels such as Al Jazeera English and France 24h (the latter is included, as French media are an important part of the Tunisian media landscape); and local radio programme pages in Tunisia, like Kalimah, Shams FM, Mosaique FM.

The events that happened around Sboui and the discussions of Femen's actions in the Arab world are very informative about the global media strategy of this activist movement and its impact. Even though Femen lacked a solid base from which to operate, the media tactics of Femen were so recognisable that the movement became "spreadable". Femen gained attention first in Kiev in 2008 when they demonstrated wearing erotic clothing (as nurses and prostitutes). They went topless for the first time in 2009. Receiving tremendous publicity, it has become Femen's trademark form of protest. The case of Amina Sboui is very telling in this respect. This young Tunisian female protester was not initially part of Femen, but when she posted pictures of herself on Facebook – one in which she had written "Fuck your morals" across her breasts in English and in the other "My body is not the source of someone else's honour" in Arabic, she was readily connected to the Femen movement by others. This identification of her actions as Femen protests shows how Femen started to "own" the strategy of writing on the uncovered body, as it was one of their core tactics.

Even though there are significant differences (Sboui did not walk naked in the streets, but rather posted the pictures of her naked breasts inscribed with the messages on Facebook), Sboui's actions quickly became associated with Femen and seen as part of their signature strategy. Sboui's statement around her actions suggests that this is part of Femen's careful strategy: In an interview with Ettounsia TV, an Arabic language Tunisian television channel, she stated that she approached Femen with the idea to join in their radical activism. She proceeded to explain that Femen told her to first stage a protest and that they would then back her afterwards. Sboui explained on television that she hesitated and that she "only" posted it on her own Facebook page and opted not to walk around naked in the streets of Tunisia, as she did not want to "provoke or be disrespectful".[1] Her comment on the extensive media coverage following her actions suggests that the connection of her actions to the Femen movement played a big role in the media attention she gained: There are "many naked women on porn sites [in Tunisia] and nobody cares; but because my message is political then it becomes problematic".

The key players in the Femen movement also show a critical awareness of the role of the media and, more importantly, suggest that this is something that guides their actions. In an interview with *Le Monde Diplomatique*, April 2013, Inna Shevchenko states: "We know what the media need — sex, scandals and fighting — and that's what we give them … To be in the newspapers is to exist at all."[2] In earlier interviews, (20 Minutes, Channel 23, held on 23 July 2012), Shevchenko states: "The media did not pay attention to us. And one day we took our t-shirts off,"[3] and "We live with men's domination and this is the only way to provoke them, the only way to get attention."[4]

With a core media strategy and very recognisable form of activism, Femen's message was easily spread through the media. One could argue that even though parts of their activism relied on on-the-ground activism, where spaces were disrupted, the main form of activism was a mediated one: They relied on the media to relay their message, and the

staged performances on the street were really that, "performances", not so much for the bystanders on the scene in general, but for media actors specifically.

Silas Harrebye's concept of "creative activism" (2013) is helpful here. Developed for understanding artistic activism, particularly arguing why "traditional theories of political art, social movements and citizenship are in themselves insufficient to accurately describe" these new activist forms, it can also help us categorise Femen's form of activism. First, Femen's media use is "strategic" and "conscious" (p. 2), which the concept of mediatisation already allows us to capture. But what is more is that, like with creative activism, their activities are project based. This type of activism "is not based on a stable political organization", nor does it "stress the importance of long-time planning and registration". Rather, it is characterised by "creative events, contemporary groups on Facebook and spontaneous reaction" (Sørensen in Harrebye, 2013, p. 3).

Finally, their activities seem "process rather than result-oriented" (p. 3). On the whole, in their activism Femen do not necessarily ask for a direct change or a particular outcome but rather focus on the media intervention. As such, the Femen movement seems more of a media strategy rather than a social movement. Their *actions* not the *mission* form the movement. The focus lies on the *process* rather than the *outcome*, which fits with Harrebye's concept of aesthetic activism. However, the activists themselves refuse "to recognize themselves as artists" (Ackerman, 2013), which suggests that their actions cannot be entirely categorised as aesthetic activism as described by Harrebye. It could be that their media performance, orchestrated from above, is only a matter of "form over content" and does not necessarily imply that they are not interested in specific political outcomes. However, as Galia Ackerman notes in her book on Femen, their forms of protest are not only increasingly "radical" but also increasingly "artistic" in nature. In a more cynical reading, art critic Mikhail Petrenko (2014) interprets Femen's actions as a "simulation of protest", where Femen utilise "radical art as a form of social protest". This protest has not lead to any "tangible social change", he argues, but has made the participants "very successful in the global entertainment industry."

But whereas creative activists aim at "getting citizens to question what is right and wrong" and "avoid communicating cemented beliefs in their actions" (Harrebye, 2013, p. 3), Femen squarely communicate their beliefs. This is an interesting divergence from other forms of new social movements and arguably where Femen's lack of broader societal impact (particularly in the geographical regions that they aim at) can be located: Whereas new social movements have moved "towards more horizontal forms of decision making" and resist bureaucratisation (Pearce in Harrebye, 2013, p. 3), Femen have rather tight control and a top-down message.

LOOSE NETWORKS VERSUS CENTRALISED POWER

New media technologies have been ascribed an important role in the development and restructuring of social movements and activism, most prominently the "shift from relatively centralized, hierarchical organizational structures to highly decentralized, loosely affiliated contingent networks that link a wide variety of groups, actors, and interests without imposing a single dominant agenda or program of action" (Lievrouw, 2011, p. 175). In many ways, Femen fit the notion of mediated global movement. The activists on the ground in the variety of places are loosely connected to the contingent network of people that constitutes Femen, and the activities are widely scattered geographically. There is no firm policy agenda, and the connections between activities and partners in the various geographical locations in which the protests have taken place seem precarious. As noted by Camilla Reestorff (2014, p. 482), the Femen movement is "based on loose affiliations and alliances derived from identity construction, values and lifestyle", rather than drawn from traditional markers of identity.

However, at the same time, Femen defy this understanding of a new social movement, as, contrary to what you would expect in a "loosely connected", contingent network, it has a strong top-down message. This top-down nature of Femen's communication approach results in a lack of space for interpretations and appropriations of the message by activists on the ground in the local communities. It is precisely this feature of the Femen movement that gives rise to a great deal of resistance towards the movement. Local feminists in the Arab world, who are considered a core target group and could be a possible ally of Femen, denounce what they call a "scripted" message broadcast by Femen. The media strategy is disapprovingly described as "urban guerrilla techniques" aimed at provoking the audience through aggressive slogans and physical contact and resulting in a well-orchestrated, dramatised "*mise-en-scène*" of the body aimed at presenting the Femen activists as victims.[5]

It is important to note here that the resistance to the strategies used is not simply due to with the nudity involved. Local feminists, on the site "Intifadat Al Mar'a fil Alam Al Arabi" (Uprising of Women in the Arab World), compare the actions of Amina Sboui with those of Alia al-Mahdi, an Egyptian activist, who also posted photos of herself naked on her Facebook page in 2010 to challenge Islamists. While the action of uploading naked photos of themselves can be seen as one way of challenging society's patriarchal norms, it is the fact that al-Mahdi and Sboui collaborated with Femen that is deemed problematic. The group, as a result of the way it operates in a top-down manner, is seen as a "post-colonial feminist movement"[6] and as western imperialist feminism (see Fuser, 2013). There is much resistance to Femen among feminists in the Arab world, given that the group incorporate in their message of equality and empowerment of women an aggressive anti-Islam stance.

Femen's messages feature derogatory statements that discredit the whole of "Arab culture", resulting in much resistance among those that are on the receiving end. Statements such as the following, uttered by Femen founder Anna Hutsol in an interview for a US magazine, are rather common: "[In Ukranian] society we haven't been able to eradicate our Arab mentality towards women."[7] Suggesting a monolithic Arab mentality towards women that needs to be eradicated, Femen not only position Arab, Muslim women as oppressed by their men, but also positions Arab women (as if a homogenous group) against the "enlightened and liberated" women of the West, who supposedly live in a civilised and superior society.

In a stark attack of Femen's strategy, Roqayah Chamseddine describes the movement as "so inebriated with colonial feminist doctrine that they gleefully take part in patronizing, Islamophobic and misogynistic rhetoric."[8] In an opinion piece, researcher Sara Salem equally points to the colonial, superior stance of Femen:

> By clearly delineating the boundaries of what is 'good' and 'bad' feminism, Femen is using colonial feminist rhetoric that defines Arab women as oppressed by culture and religion, while no mention is made of capitalism, racism, or global imperialism. It is actively promoting the idea that Muslim women are suffering from "false consciousness" because they cannot see (while Femen can see) that the veil and religion are intrinsically harmful to all women.[9]

Likewise, in *The Huffington Post* Sofia Ahmed states:

> What Femen are doing is highly counterproductive and detrimental to Muslim women across the world. For me and hundreds of other women who have got in touch with me over the past few days, their tactics are a part of the ideological war that is going on between neo-colonial elements in the West and Islamic societies.[10]

The statements made by key activists in the Femen movement paint a simplified and derogatory picture of Arab women and provide little power for those subject to their strategies to connect to, as shown by this statement by Inna Shevchenko: "They [Muslim women against Femen] write on their posters that they don't need liberation but in their eyes it's written 'help me'."[11]

Femen denounces the resistance, stating: "They say they are against Femen, but we still say we are here for them."[12] This suggests that Femen do not consider those who resist Femen and aim to claim their own message as independent agents. This may then also be seen as the reason that Femen, as a social movement, do not succeed in connecting with those who could potentially be part of their network. As Lievrouw (2011, p. 175-6) argues, the success of mediated movements depends on the assimilation of "the contributions of participants throughout every part of the network, not by the formulation of agendas and strategies by a centralised leadership structure that are subsequently passed down to the rank and file to be carried out." This is clearly where Femen fail, as they do not allow for local contributions and for a joint formulation of their agenda.

In addition, there is no development of a collective identity cultivated "within and across the different groups involved in the movement" (ibid, p. 176). What is missing is what Lievrouw identifies as central to this type of movement, namely a "sensibility which feeds back upstream to movement organizing activities and the movement's broader social, cultural, and political aims" (ibid). In her break with the movement, Amina Sboui refers to the lack of sensitivity towards Arab culture and particularly the religion of Islam. In an interview, she states:

> I don't want my name to be associated with an Islamophobic organization. I did not appreciate the action taken by the girls shouting 'Amina Akbar, Femen Akbar'[13] in front of the Tunisian embassy in France, or when they burned the black Tawhid flag in front of a mosque in Paris. These actions offended many Muslims and many of my friends. We must respect everyone's religion.[14]

We can understand the implications for the lack of collective identity by drawing on the notion of counterpublics, which specifies the dual role of counterpublics: The outwardly focused approach of submitting a message to the wider public and the inwardly focused development of a collective identity.

THE DUAL FUNCTION OF COUNTERPUBLICS

Following the theory of counterpublics, we understand social movements to have two functions, forming both a space for "withdrawal and regroupment" and "bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics" (Fraser, 1992, p. 124). Thus, the forms of counterpublics communication can be divided between those with an *intra*public function, and those that are outwardly focused, *inter*public discourses. We see that Femen's mediatised communication strategy is very much focused on "their arguments outward to society as a whole" (Asen 2000, 429) and that there is very little space for the second communicative function, the conversation among peers. We see that much of the resistance of women in the Arab world has to do with the fact that Femen argue that they speak *for* these women, when they should rather speak *with* them.

Zarah Sultana was one of the women who joined the Twitter campaign against Femen, using the hashtag "#MuslimahPride. She posted a picture of herself holding a sign that states:

> I am a proud Muslimah. I don't need 'liberating'. I don't appreciate being used to reinforce Western imperialism. You do not represent me! [15]

Chamseddine argues that with their "show of thin, white grandeur," Femen involve a "seizure of native voices and the tokenization of these voices", which is "intensely problematic, ineffective and perverse."[16] And, very telling in light of the dual function of counterpublics, she advises: "you raise awareness by highlighting native voices, not co-

opting them. It is your duty to amplify, not commandeer."[17] This is linked with the need for social movements to be sensitive to the local cultural context, as specified above. Chamseddine clearly outlines the need for a conversation with those who are "represented": Acknowledgement involves listening to local groups, and Femen's top-down strategy becomes highly problematic, and the focus of their broadcast function does not contribute to building a shared identity.

The lack of awareness and attention of the local contexts, and particularly the lack of conversation with local (feminist) women and men, means that Femen's message is resisted rather than embraced, as is highlighted by Paola Salwan Daher and Joseph Daher in an Egyptian newspaper:

> Femen's understanding, or lack thereof, of Middle East and North African societies, reveal their Islamophobic tendencies ... Their only impact is to reinforce the legitimacy of reactionary currents by offending rather than meaningfully reaching out to women, thus making the job of feminists twice as hard.[18]

The authors similarly stress the need for solidarity and internal conversation, which is missing in Femen's strategy:

> MENA women could use a little solidarity, that is, movements who take up their agendas and publicize them around the world. What they do not need is co-optation of their struggles to advance Femen's image throughout the world.[19]

We can find various campaigns countering the strategy of Femen, such as: "Intifadat Al Mara Fil Alam Al Arabi (Uprising of women in the Arab world)", "Muslimah Pride Day", "Muslim Women Against Femen" and "Les Antigones". They show how Arab and Muslim women condemn Femen and feel that Femen are using their struggles to advance Femen's image throughout the world and are not letting MENA region women speak for themselves. They find that solidarity with Arab women, rather than presenting them as an oppressed, homogenous, disempowered group, would help dismantle the negative stereotypes of Arab women in mainstream western media, and allow for more empowerment and recognition. They reprimand Femen for repeating clichés, strengthening discrimination against them and isolating them from the public debate. On the Arab Facebook page "Uprising of women in the Arab world," we can find much resistance to Femen's interpretation of women (and men) in the Arab world, and they reclaim power by emphasising women's leading role in the Arab Spring. Local feminists even go as far as to state that Femen's activities harm rather than help their cause. The leader of Tunisia's decade-old feminist movement, for instance, states that the "efforts of Tunisian women are now endangered by Femen" and that Femen risk "ruining everything that we have fought for."[20]

It becomes clear that, with the geographical and cultural disparity, it is important to fulfil both functions of counterpublics. Media strategies need to be embedded in a strong

local culture in order to have a long-lasting global impact. We see that the tactics of Femen – even though they are easily spreadable and recognisable – have an adverse effect due to their antagonistic nature. Femen activists end up being labelled as the "other". Their actions are denounced to such a degree, suggesting that their tactics make Femen activists the unrecognisable other (Reestorff, 2014). Reestorff (ibid, p. 485) argues that Femen's sextremist strategy, though it forms a productive disturbance, also carries the risk that the movement produces disconnections that are insuperable. Our analysis of the response of women in the Arab world suggests that, indeed, Femen's antagonistic strategies have an alienating effect. As Karima Brini, the founder of the Tunisian association "Femme et citoyenneté" (Women and citizenship) writes, such radicalisation can be damaging: "The reasons for their fight against the exploitation of women are honourable. But what they have done here in Tunisia will adversely affect us because people will be inclined to associate their actions with organizations working for women's rights."[21]

At the bottom of this, there is another problem: Femen activists, particularly those not from the Arab world, argue that they represent the "other", and they aim their actions at liberating this other. As such, they themselves are not the ones who are marginalised, but they argue that they represent women, most notably women in the Arab world, who are, in Femen's perspective, in need of this "liberation". As shown above, this causes Arab women to feel that they are not provided any agency and are even "infantilised and patronised" by Femen.[22] As we have argued above, these disconnections can be understood when we consider the lack of *intra*public discourse: The conversation among peers is missing. Femen's strategies are so focused on the media, so geared towards meeting media logic that the important discussion with women in local contexts is missing.

CONCLUSION

Our analysis shows how Femen's highly mediatised form of protest fails to connect with women and feminists in the Arab world. We have argued that because of this focus on the dominant Western media logic, the emancipatory power of this protest aimed at the position of women in the Arab world is limited. Indeed, we see that the mediatised protest reaches wide audiences worldwide. Certainly, the use of antagonistic tactics to get messages across and the connection to the global movement of Femen, have allowed local activities to reach dispersed audiences. However, the media attention that the protesters receive due to the smart and ludic media strategies employed does not reflect the way in which the public received their message. Femen's focus on the outwardly focused, *inter*public messages, which are heavily mediatised, means that the necessary *intra*public discourse has been suspended. Femen do not engage in a conversation with peers, i.e. the women who are subject to Femen's protests. As such, the wider community at the base of this endeavour is unable to develop a common agenda – the focus has been on the arguments addressed "outward to society" (Asen, 2000, p. 429). This conversation with pub-

lics in local contexts is very much needed, however; not least because of the geographical and cultural disparity of Femen's activities and the women subject to these activities.

Media technologies enable the public, and thus also protesters, to circumvent or challenge dominant institutional news media by distributing "more widely the capacity to tell important stories about oneself – to represent oneself as a social, and therefore potentially political, agent" (Couldry, 2008, p. 386). But in their actions, Femen focus on the dominant media logics. This can be seen as overwhelming support for the institutional mediatisation argument that protest nowadays is governed by media logic. The logic of traditional media frameworks are applied by actors themselves in domains outside of these frameworks, in this case in the setting of protest. However, the aim of the paper was to show that this is only part of the story. To understand the impact of the mediatisation of politics, protest or even society at large, we need to also go to the micro level of the lived experiences of mediatisation. Our analysis shows that this can be detrimental to the impact of these messages. By focusing on reaching wide audiences, Femen fail to connect on a more meaningful level through conversation with those whose position they seek to improve. By creating a media image that everyone recognises as Femen protests, they have become the unrecognisable other for large groups in a diverse range of societies.

However, in our analysis we have limited ourselves to the actual responses expressed on social media and other media platforms, and these can be seen as a course proxy of the lived experience of mediatisation. We could even argue that these too are informed by mediatisation and perhaps follow media logic in their own way, whether a dominant or alternative media logic. In this light, it is important to consider Michael Warner's reflexive account of the complex nature of counterpublics (2002). Here, we are dealing with a global social movement, guided by a dominant media logic, countering practices in local contexts and local responses to the global movement as they are expressed in Arab (social) media responses. As such, it is not straightforward to identify what are the dominant publics and what are the counterpublics, and it is unclear, to use Warner's terminology, to which "cultural horizon" the local public "marks itself off" (Warner, 2002, p. 86). As different cultural contexts are involved, and arguably a shift in who constitutes the dominant and the counterpublic (and perhaps even varying media logics), questions surrounding agency and empowerment remain open. By moving beyond an analysis of Femen's message to include responses to Femen, this research has aimed to provide a first insight into the complexity of lived experiences of mediatisation of protest, and we hope this functions as an invitation for further research to address this complex issue.

REFERENCES

Ackerman, G. (2013). *Femen*. Paris: Calmann- Lévy.

Asen, R. (2000). Seeking the "counter" in counterpublics. *Communication Theory*, *10*(4), 424-446.

Block, E. (2013). A Culturalist Approach to the Concept of the Mediatization of Politics: The Age of "Media Hegemony." *Communication Theory*, *23*(3), 259-278.

Chandler, D. (1997). An Introduction to Genre Theory. Retrieved from http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/intgenre/chandler_genre_theory.pdf

Couldry, N. (2008). Mediatization or mediation? Alternative understandings of the emergent space of digital storytelling. *New Media & Society*, *10*(3), 373-391.

Couldry, N. (2010). *Why voice matters: Culture and politics after neoliberalism*. London: Sage.

Couldry, N., and Hepp, A. (2013). Conceptualizing Mediatization: Contexts, Traditions, Arguments. *Communication Theory*, *23*(3), 191-202. doi:10.1111/comt.12019

Fraser, N. (1992). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. In C. Calhoun (Ed.), *Habermas and the public sphere* (pp. 109-142). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Fuser, M. (2013). FEMEN: The Unveiling of Colonialist Feminism. Re. Framing Activism Blog, April 15. http://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/activistmedia/2013/04/femen-the-unveiling-of-colonialist-feminism-2/ (last accessed March 2015)

Harrebye, S. (2013). The ambivalence of creative activism as a reorganization of critique. *Culture and Organization*, (December 2014), 1-21. doi:10.1080/14759551.2013.813512

Hepp, A. (2010). Researching "mediatised worlds": Non-mediacentric media and communication research as a challenge. In N. Carpentier, I.T. Trivundža, P. Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, E. Sundin, T. Olsson, R. Kilborn, H. Nieminen & B. Cammaerts (Eds.), *Media and Communication Studies Interventions and Intersections* (pp. 37-48). Tartu, Estonia: Tartu University Press.

Hepp, A. (2012). *Cultures of Mediatization*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Hjarvard, S. (2008). The Mediatization of Society. A Theory of the Media as Agents of Social and Cultural Change. *Nordicom Review*, *29*(2), 105-134.

Lievrouw, L. (2011). *Alternative and Activist New Media*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Mazzoleni, G., and Schulz, W. (2010). "Mediatization" of Politics: A Challenge for Democracy? *Political Communication*, *16*(3), 247-261.

Petrenko, M. (2014). Femen: Simulation of Protest. MikMikPictures. https://mikmikpictures.wordpress.com/2014/10/22/femen-simulation-of-protest/ (accessed February 2015).

Reestorff, C.M. (2014). Mediatised affective activism: The activist imaginary and the topless body in the Femen movement. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, *20*(4), 478-495.

Strömbäck, J. (2008). Four Phases of Mediatization: An Analysis of the Mediatization of Politics. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *13*(3), 228-246. doi:10.1177/1940161208319097

Strömbäck, J. (2011). Mediatization and perceptions of the media's political influence. *Journalism Studies*, *12*(4), 423-439.

Warner, M. (2002). Publics and counterpublics. *Public Culture*, *14*(1), 49-90.

Witschge, T. (2014). Passive accomplice or active disruptor: The role of audiences in the mediatisation of politics. *Journalism Practice*, *8*(3), 342-356.

NOTES

1   Television interview held on 16 March 2013. All translations from Arabic and French are done by Kaouthar Darmoni.

2   'The fast-food feminism of the topless Femen' by Mona Chollet, http://mondediplo.com/blogs/the-fast-food-feminism-of-the-topless-femen (accessed February 2015).

3   Interview by Julien Menielle, 20 Minutes, Channel 23, held on 23 July 2012.

4   'Femen's topless warriors start boot camp for global feminism,' Kim Willsher, The Observer, 22 September 2012. http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/sep/22/femen-topless-warriors-global-feminism (accessed February 2015).

5   'Femen: fabrication de l'image, manipulation et guérilla urbaine', Les hommes libres, 25 February 2013, http://hommelibre.blog.tdg.ch/archive/2013/02/25/comment-les-femen-fabriquent-leur-image-mediatique.html.

6   'Les Femen, un féminisme de type néocolonial' Le Monde, 11 June 2013, http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2013/06/11/les-femen-un-feminisme-de-type-neocolonial_3428285_3232.html

7   'Femen, Ukraine's Topless Warriors,' Jeffrey Tayler, The Atlantic, 28 November 2012. http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/11/femen-ukraines-topless-warriors/265624/ (accessed February 2015).

8   FEMEN And The Suppression Of Native Voices, 6 April 2013, http://mondoweiss.net/2013/04/suppression-native-voices (accessed February 2015).

9   http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/femens-neocolonial-feminism-when-nudity-becomes-uniform (accessed February 2015).

10 Muslimah Pride: We Reject Femens Islamophobic and Neo-Colonialist Crusade to Save Us, 9 April 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/sofia-ahmed/muslim-women-against-femen_b_3044015.html (accessed February 2015).

11 Muslim Women Against FEMEN, by Eline Gordts, 4 May 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/05/muslim-women-against-femen_n_3023052.html (accessed February 2015).

12 Inna Shevchenko, ibid.

13 The expression 'Akbar' is associated in Muslim faith with 'Allah Akbar' (God is grand). Using it in this context is considered blasphemy in the Muslim faith.

14 'Amina Sboui Quits FEMEN,' *HuffPost Maghreb*, 20 August 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/20/amina-sboui-quits-femen_n_3785724.html (accessed February 2015).

15 Quoted in: 'FEMEN And The Suppression Of Native Voices', 6 April 2013, http://mondoweiss.net/2013/04/suppression-native-voices (accessed February 2015).

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 'Femen: You're Doing it Wrong', 28 April 2013, http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/15654 (accessed February 2015).

19 Ibid.

20 Tunisian Feminist Leader: 'Femen, Please Leave Us Alone,' Spiegel Online, 13 June 2013, http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/tunisian-feminist-leader-criticizes-topless-femen-activists-a-905603.html.

21 Quoted in: 'Do FEMEN's Topless Protests Advance Women's Rights or Jeopardize Them?' Global Voices, 6 augustus 2013, http://globalvoicesonline.org/2013/08/06/do-femens-topless-protests-advance-womens-rights-or-jeopardize-them/ (accessed February 2015).

22 Muslimah Pride: We Reject Femens Islamophobic and Neo-Colonialist Crusade to Save Us, 9 April 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/sofia-ahmed/muslim-women-against-femen_b_3044015.html (accessed February 2015).