

Youth Online: Learning, Activism and Democracy in the Middle East

Pınar Gümüş

Abstract:

Wired Citizenship: Youth Learning and Activism in the Middle East, edited by Linda Herrera and Rehab Sakr, offers a rich collection of various studies focusing on young people's online activities in virtual spaces in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Divided into two sections, the book investigates how the concepts and practices of democracy and citizenship are changing in the digital revolutionary age and how young people of a wired generation understand political and social change. Gathering together the works of social scientists from the fields of education policy, political science, sociology, anthropology, linguistics and international relations, this volume realizes an interdisciplinary and multidimensional picture of its subject matter.

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Departing from the sociological understanding of generation referring to the classical work of Mannheim, Herrera defines "wired generation" by emphasizing the ways in which the communication behavior of the high-tech era leads to a rewiring of users' cognitive maps. In respect thereof, it changes their relationship to political and social systems and their notion of themselves as citizens (p.20). She also specifies the long periods of authoritarian regimes and political repression, youth unemployment as well as surging youth populations as the most crucial processes contextualizing young people's lives in the MENA region. On the other side, increased connectivity has opened up new spaces for young people to question their conditions and express their dissent, and moreover, to search for alternatives. While the volume studies the new possibilities that online communication and technologies provide for learning and activism, it also presents quite thought-provoking examples depicting the limits and drawbacks of online spaces. Therefore, going beyond the myth of the emancipating power of social media, this book develops a critical and coherent framework of analysis regarding the effects of online sociality.

The edited volume provides us with a detailed and broad discussion of Egyptian youth by four articles, all of which are extensively dealing with online spaces, specifically focusing on the periods leading up to the 25th January uprising and revolution afterwards. Herrera, in her article based on a biographical research, reveals convincingly how young people in Egypt developed themselves as wired citizens starting with online gaming, chatting and then peer-to-peer file sharing, blogging and finally organizing via Facebook. In the second article on Egypt, Diana describes how children growing up in the revolutionary times of Egypt build a political consciousness specific to their cohort and emphasizes social media as a resource of informal education. They aim at becoming conscious citizens instead of solely accepting the citizenship education at school that is based on obedience, oppression and discipline. Ali and El-Sharnouby look more closely at the "We are all Khaled Said" Facebook page/movement which has been the leading space of the protests and discuss how a movement turned an ordinary citizen, Khaled Said, into a heroic figure. In the last article on Egypt, Sakr analyses the online activities of young members of the Muslim Brotherhood, first anonymous than known, on influential sites such as "We are all Khaled Said", "6th of April" and "Raasd"; afterwards he

demonstrates the opposing functionalities of online spaces, such as that they make horizontal networking as well as traditional hierarchical power structures possible at the same time.

Boutieri's article on Morocco discusses the transformative potential of virtual sociality for students in de-colonial context. Lüküslü in her article analyses three examples of cyberspaces in which young people in Turkey have expressed their discontent mostly in radical and humorous ways. Nabulsi deals with how social media has been crucial for Palestinian activists in disseminating information about and supporting the hunger strikes. In this respect she highlights the opportunity that online spaces provide for a largely dispersed community within a transnational public sphere. Cornet's article on the rise of digital art in the Arab realm, pointing out the process of computers becoming a natural part of the artistic process and defining this as computer intimacy, discusses the democratization of the art field considering online spaces.

Christou and Ioannidou's article on online racist discourses of a youth group in Cyprus; Rahman's article on education campaigns for girls in Pakistan; and Bajoghli's article on the use of digital technology as a surveillance mechanism which creates a social paranoia for people – all invite us to think about digital technologies and online spaces more critically. These examples remind us that social media and cyberspace in general are parts of the social context, not entities in and of themselves.

In addition to its significant contribution to the fields of youth culture and the sociology of youth, *Wired Citizenship* calls for a rethinking of the way we perceive the concepts of citizenship and democracy. I hope this call will also be an inspiration for the researchers of youth studies to think about youth political participation beyond the limited patterns that seem given and unchangeable owing to the old and conventional ways of doing politics.