

Mediascapes of Human Rights: Emergent Forms of Digital Activism for the Western Sahara

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Abstract: In the disputed Western Sahara territory that has remained under Moroccan state control since 1975, Sahrawi political activists who promote self-determination continue to experience forms of state repression and silencing of human rights activism by Moroccan state authorities. Amidst a highly charged political climate, the rapid influx of new digital media sources over the past decade has increased access between Sahrawi activists and diverse public audiences worldwide. Establishing direct links via Internet communication, video and photographic documentation, and mobile phone usage has fostered contact and dialogue between Sahrawis in the territory and those in refugee camps in Algeria living in a self-proclaimed nation-in-exile since 1976. These emergent “mediascapes” and new forms of communication provide desired international visibility for the populations affected by the protracted conflict, which is often overlooked by major media outlets. Based on interviews with Sahrawis who create and consume web-based media and analysis of several key sites supporting human rights advocacy online, this paper examines the growing relevance of digital access in giving voice to political dissension, disseminating forms of cultural production, and publicizing human rights issues for broad international audiences.

Introduction

As recent examples of revolution and political upheavals in Iran, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, and other parts of the world have demonstrated, new forms of digital and social media are transforming contemporary, public terrains of communication, activism, and advocacy and effecting change in social and political worlds. An increasingly rapid “democratization of information” is providing citizens with more access than ever before to directly broadcast, transmit and report events happening in real time, including human rights abuses and brutality perpetrated by state authorities.¹ How has this technological transformation affected perceptions of human rights and responses from activists within and outside conflict zones? How do these media representations constitute new forms of cultural

production and shape perceptions of identity for groups reliant on broader audiences to support their political causes?² This essay addresses these questions by examining emergent media in Northwest Africa in the context of the ongoing conflict over the future of the disputed Western Sahara territory between the Moroccan state and the independence movement led by the Polisario Front. Drawing on examples of key human rights organizations working in the Western Sahara and two foreign-based organizations, this essay examines how Sahrawi activists are utilizing a growing web presence to foster transnational linkages with broader public audiences and increase communication across the divide of the Western Sahara and refugee camps in Algeria.

New “Mediascapes” and Global Flows of Human Rights Activism and Advocacy

In his seminal work on modernity and globalization, Appadurai (1996) argues that electronic media have transformed everyday discourse and the field of mass mediation by offering “new resources and new discipline for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds” (3). The immediacy with which electronic media can be created and consumed create a telescopic effect in which short audio-video clips or “sound bytes” increasingly shape public understandings and constructions of world events and mediate the interstices of public and private, local and global. The dual forces of electronic media and expanding transnational mobilization have “broken the monopoly of autonomous nation-states over the project of modernization” (10) and allowed for a diversity of voices and points of view to seep into the collective consciousness through media and the multiple, hybrid, intersubjective discourses engendered by media consumption.

In his taxonomy of “scapes,”² Appadurai seeks to theorize the intersections and disjunctures between different “global cultural flows” that constitute the imagined worlds of people across the globe (cf. Anderson 1991). In this framework, the term “mediascape” refers to “the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information . . . and to the images created by these media” (34). Appadurai further explains the relationship between images, media scripts and metaphors of Others:

Mediascapes, whether produced by individual or state interests, tend to be image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality,

and what they offer to those who experience and transform them is a series of elements...out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places. These scripts can and do get disaggregated into complex sets of metaphors by which people live (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) as they help to constitute narratives of the Other and protonarratives of possible lives, fantasies that could become prolegomena to the desire for acquisition and movement. (34-35)

As examples from the Sahrawi case demonstrate, emerging digital mediascapes have created new nodes of interaction between activists and supporters, Morocco and Western Sahara, and Sahrawis living across the political divides of the conflict in homeland territory, Moroccan cities, refugee camps in Algeria, and in new homelands acquired through processes of diaspora, migration and exile over the past four decades. Central to these mediascapes is the circulation of images and narratives of Sahrawi identity, aspirations, and material realities in the interstices of a long-term conflict spanning over forty years.

Imagining Sahrawi Worlds

Linked by a common history, culture, language, and religion, contemporary Sahrawi Arab communities currently inhabit varied political and socioeconomic realities where they have dispersed throughout southern Morocco, Western Sahara, Mauritania, southwestern Algeria, and migrant communities in North Africa, Europe, the Middle East, North America, and the Caribbean since the advent of the international conflict over the Western Sahara territory in 1975. The repercussions of a failed decolonization process following the official withdrawal of the Spanish colonial regime in 1975 have been widespread, leaving Western Sahara in a tenuous position under a Moroccan administration that resembles a new form of colonization (Shelley 2004). Over the subsequent four decades from 1975 to 2016, Sahrawi communities have witnessed a sixteen-year armed conflict, the forced separation of families who fled from their homeland, and the frustration of continuously stalled attempts to resolve the dispute and complete decolonization under the auspices of the United Nations.

The majority of the residents of former Spanish Sahara and their descendants remain divided between a homeland administered by the Kingdom of Morocco and camps in southwestern Algeria where over 125,000 refugees (Human Rights Watch 2008) currently reside under the leadership of the Polisario Front and its self-proclaimed state in exile since 1976, the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic. The current population in the Western Sahara is a mixture of Sahrawi Arabs and non-Sahrawi Moroccans of Arab and Berber ancestry who have moved into the area since the mid-1970s, as a result of government incentives to develop the region and create new economic opportunities. Morocco advances a domestic autonomy solution that would retain its southern provinces in the Sahara and create a separate elected legislative body in the territory to represent the domestic interests of its inhabitants. This proposed solution has garnered increasing endorsements from international allies, including France and the United States, and staunch opposition from Algeria, the Polisario Front, and its supporters.

In the global diplomatic arena, the official negotiations initiated in 1975 remain in process between Morocco and Polisario through the mediation of the UN under the MINURSO mandate. Polisario advocates self-determination through an internationally monitored referendum vote on the future of the territory that includes an option for the independence of Western Sahara. It is only under this condition that Polisario supporters in the refugee camps claim that they would peacefully resettle in their homeland. In its absence, many refugees migrate in and out of the camps in search of better educational and labor opportunities in places such as Mauritania, Algeria, Spain, and Cuba. Families who opt to leave the camps permanently often resettle in neutral intermediate zones, such as the nearby Mauritanian cities of Zouerate and Nouadhibou, which offer a similar geographic and social environment to that of the Western Sahara without the perceived encumbrance of Moroccan rule. Others choose to return to Morocco or Western Sahara, often for personal or economic reasons, to rebuild their lives and reunite with family members after decades apart from them in refugee camps.

In the absence of a sustainable, mutually accepted solution to the Western Sahara conflict, the transnational populations that are caught in the fray remain in an extremely vulnerable position. Morocco's control of phosphate deposits and coastal fishing rights on

the Atlantic is a strong economic incentive to retain the territory. Potential oil and natural gas deposits in the Western Sahara cannot be developed in the absence of a peaceful resolution. Activists who advocate self-determination in the Western Sahara and openly support Polisario regularly encounter Moroccan state repression for leading political activities and voicing opposition to Moroccan rule, (Human Rights Watch 2008). International human rights organizations also continue to experience resistance from Moroccan authorities in carrying out monitoring activities, and in 2015, the Moroccan government attempted to ban all investigations by Human Rights Watch in the Western Sahara.³

In the camps, refugees lack basic infrastructure and opportunities for employment and education. Living on Algerian soil under a government-in-exile that is not officially recognized by the UN and the majority of world powers, they subsist in a climate of uncertainty and depend on humanitarian aid to survive. Lacking a stable national identity and the privileges that come with it, such as access to a passport, Sahrawi refugees experience difficulty crossing borders and pursuing livelihoods and higher education outside the camps.⁴

Bridging the Divide: New Linkages in Diaspora Communication

Across the divide that separates refugees and their home communities in Western Sahara and within the greater Sahrawi diaspora that now spans several continents, a recent proliferation of new forms of contact, including cellular phone and Internet access, satellite television broadcasts, improved forms of transportation, and UN family reunification visits has shrunk both physical and psychological distances in the diaspora. These transformations have increased the possibilities for direct communication that circumvents state mediation or censorship. Through radio broadcasts and word of mouth transmission, poetry and song have also served as a principal point of contact between diaspora communities since the 1970s and fostered a sense of unity in the transnational struggle for self-determination (Deubel 2010).

During a visit to the camps in February 2007, I attended a public concert and poetry reading in celebration of the Women's Conference held in 27 February camp and observed several Sahrawi youth in the audience holding up their cell phones in the crowd and using them as microphones to broadcast the music and poetry to friends and family in El-Ayoun

in real time. In Agadir, Morocco, I witnessed Sahrawi student activists in Morocco from Ibn Zohr University in Agadir using their cell phones to capture photographic images of police brutality during a student protest in the spring of 2007⁵ and sending these images to contacts in the camps and international human rights organizations as an instant form of documentation and advocacy for justice (Deubel 2011). The recent global explosion of emerging digital technologies over the past decade, such as the Internet, cell phones, photography, and video, and their increased availability at low cost have significantly altered the landscape of communication and representation within the Sahrawi diaspora and international community.

Harnessing digital information technologies to create and access new networks of communication was common among different Sahrawi communities where I conducted fieldwork in 2006-2009, and suggested that new forms of communication are transforming discourses of Sahrawi media and bridging the political divide that currently separates Sahrawi diaspora communities. The implications of these technologies on human rights and monitoring and the democratization of information access are also significant. Most refugee families own mobile phones and there is a public Internet center in February 27 and other camps. According to international monitors, Polisario does not block or filter websites or email from the camps (Human Rights Watch 2008).

Until recently, communication between Sahrawis on either side of the divide was sporadic due to limited access to public telephones. In addition, Sahrawis in Western Sahara reported that Moroccan authorities had frequently blocked signals from radio stations broadcast by Polisario to prevent news transmission. Since the 1990s, however, widespread consumption of satellite television has given Sahrawi households access to news in Arabic, French, Spanish and other foreign languages. Certain channels feature periodic coverage of the Western Saharan issue, including Al-Jazeera, 'Arabiyya, British Broadcasting Company (BBC), and others that have broadcast news directly from the camps and, to a lesser extent, from Western Sahara.

Emergent Web Activism Supporting Self-Determination for the Western Sahara

Several key websites have gained prominence in Sahrawi mediascapes over the last decade. This section focuses on key Sahrawi-led activist groups, such as the Collective of Sahrawi Human Rights Defenders and Equipe Media, as well as foreign-based support groups, including the Norwegian Support Committee for Western Sahara and Sandblast, a non-profit organization that supports Sahrawi refugees through aid projects and highlights the work of local and foreign artists as a medium of political communication. The proliferation of these politically oriented websites has provided access to an important virtual space in which news, political advocacy, human rights reporting, and representations of Sahrawi society converge in a contemporary digital mediascape. Choices of textual and audiovisual forms of representation, language(s) of dissemination, links to social media companion sites on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, and web linkages to international players in human rights and development aid arenas index the particular audiences to which activists are directing their efforts and appealing for support, as well as the terrain in which their quest for visibility, awareness-raising and action is taking place. Some of the features of successful politically oriented websites on Western Sahara include the immediacy of access to current news stories and events in the region, written and audiovisual testimonials of human rights abuses in Western Sahara, the promotion of Sahrawi performance and visual arts to convey political messages, and the reinforcement of a sense of “imagined community” (Anderson 1991) among Sahrawis dispersed across multiple borders along with supporters from different regions, notably in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and, to a lesser extent, in North America, where the conflict generally receives very little press attention.

Collective of Sahrawi Human Rights Defenders (CODESA)

The Collective des Défenseurs de Droits de l’Homme (CODESA) is a central player in the contemporary Sahrawi human rights movement founded by Aminatou Haidar, one of the most prominent international activists for Sahrawi human rights. Haidar has been lauded for her peacebuilding efforts with the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award (2009) and a nomination for a Nobel peace prize (2008), among others.⁶ A native of Tantan, Haidar was detained in Moroccan prisons from 1987-1991 and 2005-2006 for activism and organization

of peaceful demonstrations in El Ayoun, and staged a hunger strike following her denial of re-entry into Western Sahara at the El Ayoun airport in 2009. Most recently, Haidar suffered an attack on her home property, arrest and detention by Moroccan police authorities in 2015 while hosting United Nations representatives to discuss human rights abuses against the Sahrawi people (rfkcenter.org).

The CODESA website disseminates information in Spanish and focuses on providing links to news articles from the international press, testimonials from victims of abuses, links to international human rights NGOs, such as Amnesty International, and links to U.N. resolutions pertaining to the Western Sahara. The choice of Arabic and Spanish language dissemination suggests a rejection of French as the official language of communication used by Morocco. By interacting with the web audience in Spanish, CODESA also appeals to popular Spanish support of the Western Sahara issue and promotes linkages with Spanish NGOs, which have historically played an integral role in supporting Sahrawi refugees in the multilateral international aid arena.

Equipe Media and Association for Victims of Human Rights Abuses (ASVDH)

Mohamed Mayara, a prominent Sahrawi journalist and human rights activist based in El Ayoun, comes from a family deeply afflicted by the political conflict between Morocco and the Polisario Front. He lost his father, who was killed in Agdz prison in Morocco in 1977 after one and a half years of incarceration, and was raised in Tantan by his mother, who also experienced arrest by Moroccan authorities. Following work abroad with the Human Rights Council in Geneva, Switzerland, with other Sahrawis during one month in 2007, Mayara was expelled from his civil service job in the municipality of El Ayoun as a form of censure for his international activism. In 2011, he was re-employed by the Moroccan state as a high school history teacher in El Ayoun (Interview 2015).

During a recent interview, Mayara described the 2009 launch of the news organization Equipe Media (<http://www.emsahara.com/>), which joined forces with other media outlets, including Radio Algeria in an attempt to use the skills and experience of a group of journalists to circumvent the virtual media embargo imposed by Morocco on pro-Sahrawi journalism. According to Mayara, Equipe Media's original goal was to produce

newsletters in different languages to communicate with foreigners, provide current information about the Western Sahara, and dispel widespread propaganda from Moroccan state media sources (Interview 2015). Equipe Media maintains translations of the website contents in Arabic, English, French, and Spanish to ensure wide accessibility.

From 2009-2013, Equipe Media focused their efforts on circulating information through direct emails and a Facebook page, which garnered over 20,000 “likes” by 2012 before it was hacked during coverage of the trial of the popular Sahrawi music group, Gdeim Izik (and the site now displays less than 2,000 “likes”). Equipe Media’s website was targeted and hacked several times in 2013 until they changed the host server to an association based in Algeria in 2014 (Interview 2015). At the time of our conversation, Mayara was preparing a newsletter for dissemination in French and Spanish about an ongoing strike at the “Black Prison” in El Ayoun where 37 Sahrawi prisoners were engaged in an active protest against their treatment by Moroccan prison authorities.

Mayara is a founding member of the Association for Survivors of Victims of Violence Committed by the Moroccan State (ASVDH), which also maintains a website translated into multiple languages, although the organization has not updated the content since 2013. ASVDH is currently the only Sahrawi-founded human rights organization allowed to have its official headquarters in Morocco, since it is considered independent from the Polisario Front. Mayara stated that he and his collaborators are currently seeking funds to support a new human rights organization based in El Ayoun that will create opportunities to unite Sahrawi activists with advocates from multiple nations (Interview 2015).

Norwegian Support Committee for the Western Sahara (NSCWS)

One of the most active foreign-based media organizations for the Western Sahara issue is the Norwegian Support Committee for Western Sahara, founded in 1993. The organization has focused on disseminating news and information on the Western Sahara, stopping foreign oil companies from working in the disputed territory against international law, and pressuring Morocco in cases of human rights violations. The committee’s stated goal is to enable Sahrawis to achieve the legitimate right of self-determination and participate in the referendum stipulated in U.N. Security Council Resolutions (www.vest-sahara.no).

NSCWS receives additional support from alliances forged with other NGOs, government partners, political parties, and researchers. Some of the committee's successes have included forcing several international oil, phosphate and fishing businesses out of the Western Sahara, providing aid to refugees in Algeria, publicizing human rights violations, coordinating approximately thirty partner organizations in other countries, and maintaining "Sahara Update," an email-based English news service with over 220 subscribers in ninety countries (www.vest-sahara.no).

At present, the NCSWS website front page features an image of refugees gathered in the camps to protest oil drilling by San Leon energy based in Ireland, which signed an agreement with the Moroccan government to begin an onshore drilling operation to find oil in the Western Sahara. Hundreds of refugees stood together forming the letters to spell out "San Leon Go Home" on October 11, 2015. The overt choice to use English as the language of this public protest reflects the activists' desire to communicate their message not only to the Anglophone company executives, but also to a broad international audience. The website also features video testimony of a young Sahrawi woman who states: "We completely reject the activities of those companies which are plundering our resources on a daily basis. As you can see, the people live in exile in brick-houses and tents. So we strongly condemn the illegal exploitation of our resources." The use of a female spokesperson in this example is also notable as it illustrates a common tendency by Polisario and Sahrawi supporters to "feminize" the Sahrawi cause by highlighting the vocal, public role of women in leadership of the state in exile and involvement in public activism.⁷ While important in acknowledging the legitimate, multiple roles of Sahrawi women active in the Western Sahara and the camp environment, this widespread rhetoric of women's empowerment, has in some cases obscured existing problems for Sahrawi women and failed to represent the concerns of those in the most vulnerable and marginalized positions in refugee society (Fiddian-Qasmiyyeh 2014).

Sandblast: Voices and visions from Western Sahara

Another important source of support for the Western Sahara and refugee camps in particular is the UK-based organization Sandblast (www.sandblast-arts.org). Founded as a

charity in 2006, Sandblast is managed by a committee and directed by Danielle Smith, a filmmaker, photographer and anthropologist by training who has worked in the camps since 1991.⁸ Unlike the other organizations featured here that focus mainly on news and political information, Sandblast's unique mission involves promoting Sahrawi arts and cultural production and increasing the visibility of the arts and artists in activist projects. Sandblast relies on charity fundraising through direct solicitation of donations and participation in grassroots aid projects to benefit Sahrawi refugees. Since 2001, Sandblast has supported an annual marathon ("Run the Sahara") near the camps in Algeria to raise money for refugee projects. In 2007, Sandblast sponsored a three-day festival of Sahrawi arts and culture in London featuring more than eighteen artists from the camps. Sandblast also supports Sahrawi Artists Fund workshops in the camps to provide classes in film and theater, music and craft design by Sahrawi and foreign artists. Photographs posted on the website include the work of foreign supporters who have traveled to the camps to document subjects including land mine victims, Sahrawi women, and everyday life in the camps. Other artistic representations include creative writing, documentary film, and music. Currently, Sandblast is working on a project to facilitate the establishment of a local music recording industry for Sahrawi musicians by funding studios, sound equipment, and training workshops for sound engineers. Since music and performance have long held a central place in Sahrawi and greater Hassanophone societies (Deubel 2011; Guignard 2000; Norris 1968), this particular form of activism draws on indigenous genres to spread political messages through a popular performance medium. With a history of combining Arab poetic traditions with sub-Saharan African styles of musical performance, Sahrawi poets and musicians and their counterparts in Hassanophone regions of Mauritania have long engaged in public performances of sung poetry to communicate persuasive, politically oriented messages and provide social commentary. For other minority groups in North Africa, especially the Tuareg in the Sahel and Berber groups in Morocco and Algeria, musical visibility has played a central role in raising awareness for pan-Amazigh political projects (cf. Goodman 2005) and Tuareg political movements publicized by popular bands, such as Tinariwen and Tartit from northern Mali, that have gained an international following in the world music scene.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the emergent mediascape of human rights in the Western Sahara and SADR refugee camps has allowed activists to harness a widening array of digital technologies, including web and social media sites, video reporting, text and instant messaging, and rapid, digital circulation of images to establish a larger international presence, reach a growing audience of potential supporters, and subvert certain restrictions imposed on print and broadcast media by Morocco in the Western Sahara. Nonetheless, the overall reach of these organizations still suffers from pervasive ignorance of the Western Sahara issue in mainstream international media and a dire lack of awareness of the ongoing costs of the conflict for refugees, political detainees, and Sahrawis coping with everyday effects of the political impasse that constrains their opportunities in multiple domains. As the process of establishing an increasing digital voice for the Western Sahara engenders new forms of Sahrawi subjectivity, it is important to continue documenting the ways in which creators and consumers of these media shape the representation of Sahrawi people and their political projects in virtual and real public spaces.

Notes

¹ Cf. AlSayyad, Nezar and Muna Guvenc. 2015; Byrm, Robert, et al. 2014; Harrelson-Stephens and Callaway 2014; Howard and Hussain 2013; Jamali, 2015; Markham 2014; Rennick 2013.

² Appadurai's taxonomy includes the terms ethnoscaples, technoscaples, mediascaples, financescaples and ideoscaples (33).

³ Cf. Statement Regarding Human Rights Watch Activities in Morocco (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/10/02/statement-regarding-human-rights-watch-activities-morocco>). The Moroccan government published a full-page ad in the Wall Street Journal publicizing this request on October 2, 2015.

⁴ Most refugees seek to obtain passports from Algeria or Mauritania for the purposes of international travel (Interviews 2007).

⁵ The protest followed an outbreak of violent fighting between Sahrawi and Amazigh (Berber) student groups at the university that continued in several Sahrawi student neighborhoods. Sahrawi students involved in the incident alleged that police did not protect them from attacks and incited students to attack them (Interviews, 2007 and 2009).

⁶ Haidar was also awarded the Civil Courage Prize (2009) and the Juan Maria Bandres Human Rights Award (2006).

⁷ During the era of armed conflict with Morocco when most men in the camps were involved in warfare, Sahrawi women assumed most responsibilities for administering camp life and have continued to play an integral role on the social and political life of the camps. With high levels of literacy and education, Sahrawi women are often highlighted in the literature as examples of how SADR promotes democracy, gender equality, and women's involvement in the state (Deubel 2010; Fiddian-Qasmiyyeh 2014; Boum 2014).

⁸ Smith's previous works include the documentary films "Song of Umm Dalaila: The Story of the Saharawis" (Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources, 1993) and "Beat of Distant Hearts: Art of Revolution in Western Sahara" (Seattle, WA: Arab Film Distribution, 1999).

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Web resources

Amis du Peuple du Sahara Occidental (APSO): <https://saharadoc.wordpress.com> (French)

Association de soutien à un referendum libre et régulier au Sahara Occidental (ARSO): <http://www.arso.org> (Arabic/English/Portuguese/Spanish)

Association sahraouie des victimes des violations graves des droits de l'homme Commises par l'Etat du Maroc (ASVDH): <http://www.asvdh.net> (Arabic/English/French/Spanish)

Collective des défenseurs sahraouis des droits de l'homme (CODESA): <http://www.codesaso.com/> (Spanish/Arabic)

Norwegian Support Committee for Western Sahara (NSCWS): <http://www.vest-sahara.no> (English/French/Norwegian/Spanish)

Equipe Media: <http://www.emsahara.com/> (Arabic/English/French/Spanish)

Official website of the public television station of the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR): <http://rasd.tv/index.php>

Sandblast: Voices and visions from Western Sahara: <http://www.sandblast-arts.org/> (English)