Demanding Connectivity:
The Performance of 'True' Identity
and the Politics of Social Media

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Abstract

Why should we desire political connection? And what happens when connectivity becomes a prerequisite for entry into the political? This essay argues that the demand to connect comes with the normalization of a model of citizenship. In this model, individuals are compelled to properly manage network connections and information flows or else be rendered unworthy of inclusion in the social. Those who are marked as unable to manage connections are rendered subjects that must be excluded for the operation of the political. Current debates about social media and political action reduce democracy and the political to little more than the 'freedom of speech' and the associated 'freedom to connect'. Through the examination of the controversy surrounding the blog 'A Gay Girl in Damascus', I claim that the current formation of social media demands the fixing of identity and a willingness to 'transparently' divulge all personal information to others. Disregarding the often tortuous negotiations of publicity and privacy necessary for the political action of marginal populations and identities, the demand to connect requires subjects to submit to a uniform ideal of openness. Those who refuse to agree to the demand to connect are rendered morally impoverished and undeserving of acknowledgement as citizens.

Contributor Note

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According to social media analyst Bill Wasik, 'The year 2011 brought waves of crowd unrest on a worldwide scale unseen for more than three decades… [T]he past year saw a new generation of activists rediscover – and subtly reinvent, through social media – the massive street action as a means of political expression' (2012: 80). Even though Wasik acknowledges the importance of physical space in these protests, he still repeats the common narrative that places new 'dematerialized' network technologies at the center of protests across the world. In the most extreme version of this account (and one very popular in the West), social media *caused* these protests to happen. The demand for democracy sprung from the inherently democratic potentials embedded in Western technology. I need not rehash the sheer number of arguments that claim networked media will reinvent or reshape democracy. This belief seems almost ubiquitous, both popularly (Kelly 1994; Kirkpatrick 2010; Shirky 2008) and in academic discourse (Benkler 2006; Castells 2009; Hardt and Negri 2000). Implicit or explicit in these arguments is the claim that *connection* will perfect political agency. Either the Internet enables the direct action of individuals linked together as never before or political disaffection permanently wanes away through online participation.

Certainly, social networks are used to organize protests throughout the globe. But networks alone cannot guarantee the practice of democracy (cf. Morozov 2011). Nonetheless, political struggles are constructed as struggles *only* over connectivity and flow when networks are

the central political actor. Assumptions about the political effects of network technology reduce politics and experience to these properties of networks: the conjoined beliefs that *connection is freedom* and *connection is resistance* are held as axioms in spite of any counterevidence. Social movements are formed out of a desire for the freedom of *information and flow*, not equality or justice. The freedom of speech, as an analog to the free flow of information, is fetishized as that which naturally brings about democracy. Connection and the maintenance of flow are necessarily correlated with liberty. In sum, the argument goes, networking is intrinsically political – to connect is to embrace the power of liberation through technology.

Yet these desires for 'reconnecting political disconnection' are not ones that do away with the limitations of contemporary mechanisms of state-based democracy in the name of freedom. Instead, equating connection with political agency produces a subject – the *network citizen* – that understands and internalizes the twin tasks of connection and flow as the proper uses of personal liberty. These freedoms afforded the proper network citizen delineate the possibilities of political action and resistance on a network. And this network 'politics' is defined out of directives to manage and perpetuate flows and connections through the continuous generation of 'true' information. Political events beyond the West, like those in northern Africa and the Middle East, are reframed without cultural and historical context, completely in terms of individualistic

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actions that are dedicated to connectivity and flow as intrinsic social goods. Social networking 'revolutions' are presented as foregone successes because those participating appear to conform to the demands of network citizenship, in spite of the fact that any significant governmental or political transformation may not have actually happened.

This essay examines the formation and limitation of network citizenship through the controversy surrounding the American blogger Tom MacMaster and his online persona Amina Arraf, the pseudonymous author of the blog 'A Gay Girl in Damascus'. For years, MacMaster posted as Arraf, claiming first-person accounts of life and then revolution in Syria for a multiply-marginalized individual. His blog achieved a fair amount of fame, virally and in the mainstream press, before he was revealed as the true author. How MacMaster, as Arraf, describes the proper behavior of a network citizen illustrates the emergence of a new kind of subject, one that demands connectivity and the expression of 'truth' even while remaining disconnected and 'false'.

In studies of Web 2.0 politics, blogs are often understood as spaces for political discourse because they enable at least a modicum of anonymity. They give marginal subjects the ability to express unique, individual experiences in the face of repressive state apparatuses (Keren 2006). Because the author of a blog can remain invisible, 'colonized' subjects are empowered through technological means to speak in the face of political or social oppression (Maioli

2011: 197; cf. Hillis 2009). This power of blogging, however, is typically understood to come from the medium's fostering of pure and authentic expressions of experience – although this power is specific to the Western embrace of technological performances of 'true' selves (Lovink 2012: 98-101). The popularity of blogging, however, has waned in recent years, replaced with social networking and the microblogging of Twitter and Tumblr. Significantly, social media do away with the anonymity of blogs. The socially networked self one performs must never appear to wear a technological mask. According to Geert Lovink, 'No longer encouraged to act out a role, we are forced to be 'ourselves' (in a form that is no less theatrical or artificial)… There is no alternative identity' (2012: 13). The freedom to speak the 'true' self while remaining hidden is replaced with the belief that liberation comes from the 'complete' revelation of self, fully connecting to the totality of the network, defined by the limits of social technologies. The ability to speak truth and have that truth recognized politically depends on one's willingness to fully reveal one's fixed and totalized identity.

'A Gay Girl in Damascus' illustrates the collision of a number of different ways of understanding invisibility, truth, liberation, and the role of technologically mediated connectivity as Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs inch closer to those of a socially networked and automated Web 3.0. Simply, the empowered individual that is able to speak because of the anonymity of virtual community becomes a subject from which is demanded the constant flow of 'true' personal information – and,

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consequentially, that subject is likewise punished if information is revealed as false by being rendered morally unworthy of connectivity. 'A Gay Girl in Damascus' was written by an individual who thought he was occupying the position of a blogging subject while discursively normalizing the behavior of a subject of social media. As a result, the very real nuances of invisibility and agency needed for the negotiation of the political by marginal populations are simply neglected in favor of a belief that liberation comes from connecting and expressing one's true self through the technological, even when that belief is not and cannot be performed through one's own actions. The subtleties of contingent and specific political activities encounter the dumb and blunt directives of social media to perform 'truth' and 'reality'.

In the discourse of MacMaster and Arraf, the proper network citizen has an ethical responsibility to be 'transparent'. One must connect globally. One must maintain a flow of information through connections. But, as the controversy surrounding the outing of MacMaster as the author of the blog demonstrates, human beings are not particularly adept to responding to this ethical demand, in part because it denies the complexity of everyday life in favor of a uniform demand defined by simplistic technologies. Upon revelation that the blog was not written by a real lesbian living in Syria, MacMaster was criticized as a liar, a fraud, and a fake. He eventually deleted Arraf's blog, attempting to minimize, if not fully erase, his Internet presence. If, in accordance with the logic of networks, openness and

connection are political acts that realize democracy, then MacMaster's actions demonstrate a failure to live up to his own ideals, culminating in an act of self-erasure and the abdication of his connectivity. Network citizenship defines the proper behavior of humans as analogous to the formal limitations of network technology and information. To be transparent online denies any performative play of identity in the name of the connection of true selves and the free flow of true information. Data can (must?) be fixed, but human identity is often mutable. Yet when one's identity cannot be fixed, then one is rendered unworthy of network citizenship.

In the following pages, it may sound as if I am being critical or judgmental of MacMaster. His actions, which I'll elaborate below, clearly demonstrate an absence of self-reflexivity regarding the privilege of his own voice. But I do not think this demonstrates something akin to the 'poor judgment of a misguided individual'. MacMaster's writings are symptomatic of more generalized beliefs about social media dominant in Western interpretations of the power of communication. Thus, I focus throughout on the discourse MacMaster has appeared to internalize. The discourse that speaks through MacMaster defines proper subjects of social media. It circumscribes their behavior in terms of open technological connectivity and the 'authentic' performance of true selves. MacMaster, like many of us, does not do this with his own performance of self online. MacMaster's subjectivity is split between two radically different ways of understanding the possibilities of human identity. Like MacMaster, we too are

interpellated by the demands of social media and network citizenship to perform our authentic, true selves. And in the name of the performance of true selves and true bodies, political tactics that involve the necessity of invisibility or transformation are ever so subtly excluded from the possibilities engendered by the current techno-political context. Those that do not conform to the demands of technology are marked as dangerous others to be excluded, if not completely erased.

Universalizing Visibility and Agency in 'A Gay Girl in Damascus'

During the early days of political unrest in Syria, Western news media focused an inordinate amount of attention on a single blog. That blog, 'A Gay Girl in Damascus', written by a half-American, half-Syrian named Amina Abdullah Arraf al-Omari, detailed the experience of an out lesbian in the Middle East. Amina Arraf's writings, like other blogs of women in the Middle East, were championed as evidence of the power of media to protest and defy oppressive governments and repressive social norms (cf. Keren 2006; Maioli 2011). 'Teargas was lobbed at us. I saw people vomiting from the gas as I covered my own mouth and nose and my eyes burned', she wrote shortly after protests began. Despite the challenges she faced in her daily life, Arraf's blogging nonetheless gave a first-hand account of life in Syria for those reading across the globe. Arraf claimed that her Internet communication would inspire others to political action. 'Blogging is, for me, a way of being fearless… I believe that if I can

be 'out' in so many ways, others can take my example and join the movement' (Quoted in Marsh 2011). Her blog went viral after an April 26, 2011 post titled 'My Father, the Hero', an account of how her father confronted Syrian security agents accusing Arraf of espionage. 'MY DAD had just defeated them!' she wrote in the post, 'Not with weapons but with words… and they had left… I hugged him and kissed him; I literally owe him my life now' (Quoted in Lazar 2011). In Arraf's narratives, here and elsewhere, communication triumphs over force.

Shortly after this entry Arraf went into hiding, and then disappeared (Mroue 2011). In an interview with CBS News a month earlier, Arraf claimed that she was then already actively hiding from Syrian security forces. 'I don't want to go to prison, though I am not scared of it', she reasoned. 'I believe I can do more for Syria free inside Syria than as a martyr'. Her actions for Syria, of course, were devoted to communicating online to a global audience. Arraf claimed:

> The worst thing we face is our own fear. If we want to be free, we must first overcome our own worst enemy, which is the one within us. It is that fear that has allowed the dictators to rule; it is that fear that keeps us as Arabs, as Muslims, as women and as lesbians trapped. If we stop being afraid within ourselves, we can achieve freedom. The prison of our own minds is the darkest place. For me, it has sometimes seemed like it was harder to be out as an Arab Muslim woman in America than as a lesbian in Syria. Maybe I am lucky. But, if we can be bold in who we are, we can

achieve true freedom. (Quoted in Lazar 2011)

This liberation comes from speaking through networked communications – connecting to others and authentically revealing one's true self. The revelation of personal data perpetuates the free flow of information, in turn liberating the self in the face of governmental oppression.

Arraf's claims are noticeably different than those made in other blogs written by individuals under the threat of violence. Both blogged and published writings about daily life in Iran and Iraq, for instance, generally suggest that individuals use everyday strategies of resistance that negotiate publicity and privacy as a means of coping with oppression. Being 'meek' or 'hidden' does not imply a willingness to accept governmental or religious marginalization, but suggests an active and nuanced role in resisting and challenging the hegemony of the state, patriarchy, or heteronormativity. The image of life in these countries depicted by other bloggers doesn't quite mesh with Western narratives about oppression in the Middle East. Islamic women, in particular, are often depicted as essentially passive victims to be saved. The writing on blogs instead depicts engaged individuals who actively resist social and governmental marginalization. The inability or unwillingness to understand how those living in Middle Eastern countries actively engage in political resistance through everyday means consequently ignores many of the very real forms taken by state violence against marginal populations in favor of Western beliefs about Islam (Keren 2006: 52). Likewise, in

other blogs from the Middle East, anonymity is regularly and explicitly understood as that which enables the freedom to speak. The blogger NHK, a teenage Iraqi girl, has stated as much: 'I don't put my real name on this blog because I'm not allowed to have a free opinion in this life. I can't tell the truth until I am sure that no one knows who I am' (Quoted in Maioli 2011: 196).

In contrast to these uses of blogs, Arraf's statements define an ideal of network citizenship based on Western beliefs about the power of technology and liberation through the full performance of one's true identity. Unlike the situated uses of technology by individuals in Iraq, Iran, and elsewhere, negotiating local visibility and invisibility through the potentially anonymous performances enabled by the Internet, Arraf explicitly articulates universal, global visibility with strength and emancipation. Social media broadly defined – blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and so on – enable democracy and revolution through the power of free speech and global social connectivity. One must connect and flow to participate politically. The revelation of self to others is politically revolutionary. In her own writings and in the news articles reporting on her story, Arraf was a threat to the Syrian government because of the power of her voice, broadcast to others around the world through her blog. Being *out* is not just about sexual identity in Arraf's narrative. It signifies a commitment both to one's own personal authenticity and to the demands of network citizenship. To communicate is to connect with others, mediated through networked flows of information. Transcending the self

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through connection, ironically via communication that reveals and

identifies one's 'true' self, is the ultimate political gesture here.

Figure 1. *'Free Amina Arraf'. A viral image posted on Facebook during the political uprisings in Syria, protesting the detainment of Amina Abdullah Arraf al-Omari. Source: http://www.facebook.com/freeamina, accessed June 8, 2011. This page is no longer online.]*

Many in the United States and United Kingdom found Arraf's story and message inspiring, perhaps because they reflected Western ideologies of truth and authenticity. In the wake of her disappearance various websites and social networks on the Internet were abuzz with calls for her safety and release. The U.S. State Department had

even begun an investigation into her whereabouts (Bell and Flock 2011). Images demanding 'Free Amina Arraf' were posted throughout Facebook and on blogs (Figure 1). 'Borders mean nothing when you have wings', stated one, echoing an ideal of cosmopolitan connectivity fostered by the Internet. The Internet enables the transcendence of

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geography and the state through global connection and the flow of information across borders. The repressive governments controlling populations, the police regulating geographical boundaries and the behavior of those within them – not to mention the force of localized social norms in regulating identity and the body – are inconsequential when juxtaposed with the 'flight' enabled through networked connection. Network citizenship is global and totalizing. Borders mean nothing when you connect and flow across them.

As scrutiny increased, holes in Arraf's narrative began to emerge. Nobody had ever actually met her. The pictures she had on her blog had been taken from the Facebook page of Jelena Lečić, a Croatian expat living in London. The posts on her blog originated from an IP address in Scotland. As the search to find Amina Arraf intensified, the harder she was to locate. This was because she did not exist. Her digital trail led to a 40-year old white, heterosexual, married American from Georgia named Tom MacMaster, a postgraduate student at the University of Edinburgh. He had been writing as Arraf on blogs and message boards for over four years (Bell and Flock 2011).

Notably, the *Guardian* was quick to defend its reporting on Arraf. The blog, the paper argued, was still valuable in terms of drawing attention to the problems of real gay and lesbian individuals in Syria (McCrum 2011). MacMaster, in an interview with the paper, claimed that, in creating Amina and her blog, he only wanted to distance his own identity from the claims he was making about Syria. If he had blogged as

himself, 'someone would immediately ask: why do you hate America? Why do you hate freedom? This sort of thing'. Blogging as a gay Arab woman would avoid controversy. 'I regret that a lot of people feel I led them on', said MacMaster, 'I regret that … a number of people are seeing my hoax as distracting from real news, real stories about Syria and real concerns of real, actual, on-the-ground bloggers, where people will doubt their veracity' (Quoted in Addley 2011). After he had been outed as the true author, MacMaster refused to fully apologize. 'While the narrative voice may have been fictional', he wrote, 'the facts on this blog are true and not misleading as to the situation on the ground… I do not believe that I have harmed anyone – I feel that I have created an important voice for issues that I feel strongly about' (Quoted in 'Syria Gay Girl' 2011). In spite of his physical distance from Syria, the connectivity of the Internet enabled MacMaster to claim his fictional account of Syrian life as truth. MacMaster may have not been on the ground in Syria, but he was able to know exactly what it was like because of networked communication.

MacMaster's discourse seems to do away with physical bodies and physical space completely. Flows of information, while detached from material 'reality', are still able to fully represent what is elsewhere, beyond phenomenal experience. All that matters is communication and connection. Even though MacMaster was in Scotland rather than Syria, his technological connection to the Internet enabled him to produce an identity that could speak the truth of those in Syria without

firsthand knowledge. Much of the above discourse resonates explicitly with what is claimed about the contemporary networked world. Technologies extend our bodies beyond what we once thought to be our limitations (McLuhan 1964). Space is compressed, if not outright eliminated, because of networked communications (Harvey 1990; Virilio 1999). Flows of information mean more than the boundaries of states and the specificity of place (Castells 2000). Information and physical bodies are constructed as interchangeable (Hayles 1999). Given the continuation of extremely brutal repression in Syria since the Amina Arraf 'hoax', MacMaster's claims about knowledge are particularly problematic. They fit perfectly, however, with the discourse that the Internet's connectivity enables a kind of totalized 'world brain', 'hive mind' (Kelly 1994), or 'collective intelligence' (Lévy 1997) divorced from material specificity, locality, or individualized consciousness.

Nonetheless, MacMaster was heavily criticized for violating the principles he advocated. Even though he spoke the discourse of the network, he failed to live up to the demands of connection and networking because he 'hid' behind a fabricated identity. He was speaking the truth of the discourse of social media while behaving like a subject of a blog. The aporia between these two discourses, embodied by MacMaster's claims as Amina and his own behaviors as a blogger, challenges a number of assumptions about the performance of self online.

Identity, Visibility, and Network Citizenship

The ability to pass as a completely different person, with a completely different identity, has long been regarded as intrinsic to the performance of self on the Internet. As a famous *New Yorker* cartoon once stated, 'On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog'. The self performed online may be radically different than the 'real' person behind the computer, but may be considered more 'real' than the actual human user. According to Sherry Turkle, we take things on the Internet at 'interface value'. We simply accept that which is on the screen as truth. Often, computer-mediated images are more real to users than that which exists in their 'real life' beyond technology (1995: 23). Other theorists of identity in cyberspace, such as Alluquère Rosanne Stone, have argued that the performance of identity online demonstrates how humans are fundamentally endowed with multiple personalities that exceed the human body (1995). The avatar is not simply a disembodied representation, but directly points to a real person for which that representation is an essential part. For Stone, both Arraf and MacMaster would be the same person. MacMaster wouldn't be deceiving anyone with his blog. Arraf is part of MacMaster's authentic, if schizoid, identity. Ken Hillis has argued that online representations are a form of free indirect discourse. The user's avatar serves 'as a screen behind which the author may 'hide', yet at the same time it allows him or her to communicate through it to readers' (2009: 151). The avatar is never fully an extension of the self or something completely other, but is instead a blending of the two. What Hillis describes is similar to how blogs are often understood politically.

Unsurprisingly, this definition is clearly what MacMaster intended with the creation of Amina. She was an avatar that concealed his identity while permitting him the freedom to speak. He was writing from assumptions about visibility and anonymity associated with blogging rather than the totalizing revelation of self demanded by network citizenship, even though he was speaking the discourse of the latter.

The emerging discourse about online identity is that the anonymity of the Internet so celebrated in the 1990s should be eliminated in the name of civility and community. Openness and visibility must be encouraged – if not demanded – for the collective and collaborative utopia of networked communications to be realized. When MacMaster, as Arraf, claims she is 'out', she is, in part, using this definition. She is posting her name, image, and location. She defines her authenticity in terms of her willingness to divulge personal information, conflating, if not erasing, identity categories in favor of a generalized transparency of identity. While it means something different for a fiction to be radically transparent, MacMaster is nonetheless using these claims of openness and transparency as normative directions for proper network conduct in his fabrication of Amina Arraf.

This understanding of identity is common among both those in the business of social networking and those making policy arguments about the future of the Internet. According to Chris Kelly, one-time head of privacy for Facebook, 'Trust on the Internet depends on having identity fixed and known' (Quoted in Kirkpatrick 2010: 13). Mark

Zuckerberg, the CEO of Facebook, has claimed that this fixing of identity is based in the 'radical transparency' of the Internet and social media. 'You only have one identity', he stated in a 2009 interview, so emphatically that he repeated this phrase three times within one minute. 'The days of you having a different image for your work friends or co-workers and for the other people you know are probably coming to an end pretty quickly… [T]he level of transparency the world has now won't support having two identities for a person' (199). Harvard law professor Jonathan Zittrain has argued that the only possibility to maintain the openness and freedom of the Internet is to permanently and openly link online identity with bodily identity. Without this link, in Zittrain's view, the Internet will descend into impersonal chaos. 'When we participate in other walks of life – school, work, PTA meetings, and so on – we do so as ourselves, not wearing Groucho moustaches… The same should be possible for our online selves' (2008: 228).

The intersecting vicissitudes of sexuality, race, and gender – among a number of other possible categories – make any equating of Tom MacMaster and Amina Arraf intensely problematic. As should be obvious, to be 'out' has significantly different connotations when it comes to the marginal identities that MacMaster appropriated in creating the persona of Arraf than it does when Mark Zuckerberg argues for a necessary 'radical transparency'. This is especially true considering MacMaster's repeated calls for the transparent performance of self. MacMaster's usage of 'out' conflates

sexual identity with the openness and flow of network citizenship. Being true to one's identity means that it must be communicated. With sexuality, in particular, the public embrace of an identity is indeed part of a project of sexual liberation and the struggle for equality. Yet, according to Lee Edelman, the practice of making sexuality legible is also part of a homophobic ideology that demands the identification and marginalization of other sexualities deemed a threat to the hegemony of heterosexuality:

> Heterosexuality has thus been able to reinforce the status of its own authority as 'natural' (i.e., unmarked, authentic, and non-representational) by defining the straight body against the 'threat' of an 'unnatural' homosexuality – a 'threat' the more effectively mobilized by generating concern about homosexuality's unnerving (and strategically manipulable) capacity to 'pass', to remain invisible, in order to call into being a variety of disciplinary 'knowledges' through which homosexuality might be recognized, exposed, and ultimately rendered, more ominously, invisible once more. (1994: 4)

To be visible, when it comes to marginal identities, is also to become the possible object of regulation, imprisonment, and violence. With the legibility of sexuality, identification can be employed in the service of silencing those marked as other. The specific embrace of visibility or invisibility as a political strategy deeply depends on context. The same action can both empower and render one an object of control and violence. It is this stress on context and political strategy

that is eliminated through the visibility and transparency demanded by social media.

The problematic politics of openness can be seen in reactions to the 'Gay Girl in Damascus' controversy. According to MacMaster, 'This experience has sadly only confirmed my feelings regarding the often superficial coverage of the Middle East and the pervasiveness of new forms of liberal Orientalism' (Quoted in Peralta and Carvin 2011). But to what Orientalism is MacMaster referring? MacMaster had been speaking through an invented Arab lesbian as if he fully understood her experience. He is literally speaking for an Oriental Other he created.[1] Actual gay and lesbian bloggers in Syria have vehemently disagreed with MacMaster's stated intentions. According to one on Twitter, 'There is no positive side effect of the Amina hoax. It did not bring attention to Syria. It brought attention to a white fantasy'. Daniel Nassar, the pseudonymous editor of the blog 'Gay Middle East', has argued, 'Because of you, Mr. MacMaster, a lot of the real activists in the LGBT community became under the spotlight of the authorities in Syria… You took away my voice, Mr. MacMaster, and the voices of many people who I know' (Quoted in 'Syria Gay Girl' 2011). According to Nassar, because of the visibility of MacMaster's blog, police action and brutality against actual gay individuals in Syria increased. The police, not to mention members of a larger homophobic society, observed those

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[1] If anything, this certainly fits one of the ways Edward Said (1978) defined Orientalism in the book of the same name.

suspected of homosexuality with even greater scrutiny. Because of the openness and transparency of a fictional character, the ability of others to even think about leaving the closet was hindered (Nassar 2011).

The negotiations of visibility and identity follow tortuous routes. While Nassar is out in his everyday life in Syria, he is not out on the Internet. He would face very real threats of violence and arrest as a result of the increased visibility of network connectivity. Yet, in adopting this stance, Nassar is in violation of the demands for radical transparency that characterize network citizenship. He is being 'inauthentic' in the discourse of Mark Zuckerberg and Jonathan Zittrain. Nassar has multiple identities. He is hiding behind a mask because of his refusal to reveal all parts of his personal life to those online. His connectivity is only partial. When one's connectivity and transparency must be understood contextually, then one is not a proper network citizen. Nassar is following the uses of blogs in his relationship between identity and visibility – and it is precisely these nuances that are ignored in favor of the totalizing visibility demanded by social networking.

Discipline, Hierarchy, and Nature: Failed Network Citizens

There is a long history of order and social control maintained through visibility. Michel Foucault has popularly defined one conjunction of visibility and social control as *discipline*. Discipline understands personal identity not as a series of 'masks that were put on and taken off, but the assignment to each individual of his 'true' name, his 'true' place, his 'true' body, his 'true' disease' (1977: 198). Discipline requires an elaborate apparatus specifically to monitor and separate individuals; it involves the constant effort to illuminate and make visible everything to all. Foucault identifies the diagram of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon prison as the perfection of disciplinary power. In Bentham's Panopticon, the management of individual humans is still dependent on their identification, isolation, and visibility. But this identification is one that the individual internalizes and manages on her own, inducing 'in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power' (201). The Panopticon produces a subject that disciplines herself in light of the continuous *potential* of being observed.

Both discipline and panopticism rely on the creation of those in the privileged position of observing. But in the Panopticon the observers must remain hidden. They are invisible and inaudible to those who are observed. As the ultimate goal of panoptic control is the internalization of a regime of truth by the observed, the observer must forever remain phantasmagoric. The subject does not feel that she *is* being watched constantly, but that she *might be* watched at all times. She therefore acts as if she is being watched even when there is no observer present. The ability to observe while remaining invisible positions one closer to the top of the hierarchy of modern society.

The Internet has often been assumed to both give us the benefits of this

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invisibility (Turkle 1995) and to operate as a massive 'super-Panopticon' (Poster 1995). On the side of invisibility, networked communications and avatars permit users to move between identities. We can appropriate the marginal or the dominant in our online performances. Potentially, we can lurk in the background, remaining a distanced observer. This invisibility, for MacMaster, enabled him to mask his own body while advocating a politics from which he was personally distanced. Being able to escape the fixing of one's 'true' name and location, as given to us by blogs, has enabled bloggers across the globe the ability to make political claims while remaining, effectively, outside of the boundaries of police power and the political as defined by official state institutions. Yet, as Foucault remarks of the Panopticon, the observers themselves are never fully immune from observation. There is always someone higher up who may be watching.

The revelation of MacMaster as Amina also revealed the contradictions inherent in the application of network citizenship to the contemporary political context. Amina advocated for the political power of connection and radical transparency. Yet these politics could only be articulated by one who maintained his invisibility. Amina's radical transparency – much as the case is for Facebook employees – defines proper citizenship through the fixing of 'true' names, 'true' locations, and 'true' bodies. 'Civility' on the Internet – the proper relations we maintain with the others to whom we are connected – depends on our willingness to internalize and perform these 'true' selves. Yet this politics that defines

publicity and identification as absolute empowerment is defined as such by an individual who remains private, and seems to see nothing wrong with maintaining this privacy in spite of his normative claims.[2]

But the Internet is often contrasted with supposedly modern technologies of hierarchy such as the Panopticon. The Internet is a *distributed network*, defined by connections and flows that supposedly exist *without* a hierarchy. Even beyond the Internet, networks are usually defined as 'flat' and non-hierarchical (Gilligan 1982; Hardt and Negri 2000). In this distributed network, there is nowhere to hide. There is no privilege given to the observer above. There is no underclass produced by observation. A hierarchy cannot be maintained through observation on a network, as MacMaster surely discovered in the furor over his blog.

Yet there is a hierarchy on a network. This hierarchy is defined through one's willingness to adhere to the demands of the network, dividing up subjects into categories of proper and improper

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[2] The same could be said of Facebook and Google as institutions. While their employees advocate personal transparency, their business practices involve keeping many, many things secret from users and the larger public. This is often critiqued (and is one of the reasons that Mark Poster saw the potential emergence of a networked 'super-Panopticon'). Usually, the solution to this problem is to regulate and open these companies rather than question the reasoning behind demands for openness. In other words, the solution for Facebook and Google's lack of transparency is to force them to become proper network citizens through legal means (Pariser 2011; Vaidhyanathan, 2011).

citizens. Proper network citizens embrace the demand to *connect* and *expose oneself,* maintaining flows of information to others. New technologies are often assumed democratic because they supposedly permit everyday individuals the ability to more effectively accomplish these tasks, improving democracy and bettering the functioning of government through 'transparency'. Steve Mann, a computer engineering professor, has used the term 'sousveillance' to describe the use of individual surveillance techniques to monitor institutions of government and police (Singer 2011: 34). Science fiction author Cory Doctorow has referred to the same phenomena as the creation of a 'little brother' to monitor 'big brother'.[3] The power of social media, recording technologies, and connectivity comes from how new media positions everyone as a visible observer. Not only is an individual compelled to take responsibility for herself because of her potential visibility, she is compelled to monitor every other person to whom she is connected. On a network, one is *both* object of the gaze of the Panopticon and the subject that may or may not be in the observation tower.

In this arrangement of power, MacMaster's only true fault was that he refused his own visibility and connectivity. While speaking in the name of connectivity, openness, and the free flow of information, he was not actually participating in what he was advocating. He was a failed network citizen, in that his conduct was directed at hiding his

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[3] This idea is fictionalized in Doctorow's young adult novel *Little Brother* (2008).

identity and remaining, to some extent, disconnected from the network. And he was punished for violating these norms of behavior, even while advocating for them. It is through this distinction that network discourse produces a hierarchy, defining worthy and unworthy subjects based on their willingness to connect and flow. The network citizen is directed to maintain connection and flow in order to benefit the totality. Those who do not connect and flow, or cannot properly manage connections and flows, are marked as those unworthy of inclusion on the network.

Political struggles are consequently reduced to nothing more than struggles over connectivity and flow. In network discourse, justice is little more than connecting those who are not networked, ignoring any need to negotiate or avoid connectivity. According to network scientists Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler, today's forms of political marginalization are based on 'positional inequality'. This 'occurs not because of who we are but because of who we are connected to. These connections affect where we come to be located in social networks, and they often matter more than our race, class, gender, or education' (2009: 300). Strategies of social justice should focus on maintaining connections and increasing flows:

> To reduce poverty, we should focus not merely on monetary transfers or even technical training; we should help the poor form new relationships with other members of society. When we target the periphery of a network to help people reconnect, we help the whole

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fabric of society, not just any disadvantaged individuals on the fringe. (302)

For Christakis and Fowler, equality demands the connection of all individuals to the network. Flows must be evoked for global justice. The need to negotiate connectivity, as performed by countless bloggers in the Middle East, is more detrimental to these individuals than the marginalization that occurs through identity-based violence. 'Connection' becomes a panacea for any form of inequality.

Yet, while this version of justice requires more networks, networks are also constructed as natural – if not purely ontological. 'In short', claim Christakis and Fowler, 'humans don't just live in groups, we live in networks… [O]ur desire to form connections depends partly on our genes' (214). Like many other authors discussing networks (Barabási 2002; Beniger 1986; Castells 2009; Taylor 2001; Watts 2003), Christakis and Fowler argue that biological evolution has guaranteed human connectivity in such a way as to render the desire to connect as purely natural. The political work needed for social justice *always-already exists at the level of nature*. To *recognize* the need to contextually negotiate connectivity is to render oneself an aberration from the natural order of existence. 'Justice', in the form of ending 'positional inequality' through the fostering of connectivity and the evocation of flows, thus makes 'unnatural', abnormal, or even pathological subjects out of anyone who refuses the blunt dichotomy of connection and disconnection.

Network citizenship demands that individuals must work to maintain their own connections and flows. Justice and politics are, likewise, reframed as nothing other than the maintenance of connection and flow. And, finally, connection and flow are completely natural attributes of human existence. As the maintenance of connection and flow is rendered natural, then an entirely new form of hierarchy is put into place based on nothing other than the ability of an individual to conform to the demands of networks. *The failure of an individual to maintain her own connections means that the individual is not only a failure, but also an aberration from the natural order of existence.* It is this state that we can observe above. Since connectivity and flow are equated to nature, then human beings who do not conform to the attributes of networks must be excluded from the natural order of the world, remade, disciplined, or even outright eliminated, while connectivity and flow are positioned as essential for nature to persist.

'A Gay Girl in Damascus' shows us the transition from one form of technological subject – the blogging subject who is empowered through contextual anonymity – to another, Web 3.0 social media subject, who must connect and perform the truth of his or her singular identity or else be rendered an aberration from nature, unworthy of inclusion in the social, unable to participate as a political actor. We should be critical of MacMaster's ultimately Orientalist claims about 'real life' in Syria, certainly. We should take his claims about transparency and connectivity as a normative discourse that limits the

possibility for political subjectivity and agency. But we should also understand that his punishment and exclusion coincides with *our own embrace* of the discourse spoken by MacMaster himself. In other words, we should be critical of his claims, but we should not marginalize him because he is a liar, because he does not live up to our standards of 'truth'. This regime of veridiction just happens to rely on the standards produced by the normalization of network citizenship. We should not embrace the reductive discourse of truth as engendered by the network subject, or else any individual who does not conform to the demands to connect and flow 'truthfully' through the full revelation of their identity will be excluded from entry into the political. The political strategies that involve strategic anonymity and disconnection will be invalidated as nothing more than the unnatural tools of frauds and liars.

In the words of the anonymous collective Tiqqun: 'Because no one is ever depersonalized enough to be a perfect conductor of these social flows, everyone is always-already, as the very condition of survival, *at fault* in the eyes of the norm… [A]ll risky [citizens] are everywhere pushed out, quarantined, spontaneously isolated – all those who, being subject to imperial intervention, could bring down with them, through capillary action, the adjoining links in the network' (2010: 151, 155). A world of networks is a world in which human beings do not matter unless they connect, flow, and communicate, becoming subjects that behave like the technologies they use. Yet we are never 'depersonalized' enough to act like perfect technological 'conductors' of informatic connectivity and flow. Thus, at some point we will fail in the management of these tasks, only to be cut off, quarantined, and erased from that which has been rendered natural. In the case above, a subject can be formed who believes that a network citizen is a truly proper and liberated individual. At the same time, that subject can completely and utterly fail in his or her performance of the norms of citizenship, to be deleted and erased from the network because he or she did not perform 'truth'.

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