

Digital counterpublics

Female Arab network actors as producers of critical discourses

Christina Schachtner

This lecture is about the discursive practices of female network actors and bloggers from the Middle East. The discourses which they initiate are a reaction to antagonisms in societies which see themselves as homogenous and closed. In such societies, gender is a key heteronormative category of order which does not only draw a clear dividing line between men and women but which also exploits this dividing line to define the boundaries of the public and the private as well as the distribution of human rights. The network actors' discourses are critical of the public sphere as defined by the ruling powers. They can be understood as counterpublics, which typically originate in groups whose positions and interests are marginalized or oppressed. They do not only expose social antagonisms but also address political alternatives, signalling the possibilities for new conceptual spaces. The political sphere does not have a fixed location in the online discourses which were analysed but rather a wandering existence, turning up in various digital networks and blogs (Mouffe 2007).

The protagonists of these critical discourses are young women between the ages of 21 and 27 who were interviewed as part of the study "Communicative publics in cyberspace". The lecture takes empirical data from the study to explore answers to the following questions:

1. What features are typical of the network actors and bloggers' critical discourses?
2. Which structural conditions do they arise from?
3. What does the visionary substance of these discourses consist of?

Digital media are seen as the main instances and instruments for initiating, shaping and disseminating discourses, the contents and forms of which are not unaffected by the chosen medium. It would therefore also be interesting to ascertain whether cyberspace would be a suitable space for a "subversive remapping" (Roth 2013) of social order from a feminist perspective.