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Our friend, the internet: Postcolonial mediatization in Morocco

Abstract: This article investigates the ‘discursive notion’ of communication technology, as embedded in the discussion of mediatization. Instead of focusing on the technical structure of media and its impact on society, I will alternatively turn my attention to its symbolic dimension. I will look beyond the surface of the symbolic, by questioning how this dimension has been discursively created. As such, I suggest using the term ‘discursive notion’, as discourse also refers to power relations. The analysis of the discursive notion relating to the internet in Morocco is developed through the critical approach of postcolonial theory. This is done with the aim of dissecting the construction of colonial discourse, and in order to show how specific power relations continue to function to present.

Keywords: mediatization, discursive notion, symbolic dimension, internet, Morocco

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1 Introduction

During intensive field research in Morocco, where I addressed the question of the appropriation of globally available resources in a specific local context, taking the internet use by young Moroccans as an example, I witnessed the power of the social dimension of media. It became obvious that there is an additional dimension beyond national average data of the technology’s availability, local usage patterns, and media technology, which would explain the meaning and relevance of the internet. Whenever the internet was mentioned, it was done so within a context of an extremely positive meaning, and an almost magical connotation. I argue that beyond the rational structure of the technology there exists a highly symbolic dimension, which helps to explain all the enthusiasm, hopes and fears regarding the internet.

David Morley argues that the technology, despite its obvious inherent rationality, has a symbolic meaning, which to date has not been significantly considered in scientific debate:

As we have seen earlier, conventional approaches to the study of technology often leave much to be desired, not least in their exclusive focus on the supposedly rational function of technology. That perspective tends to make a simplistic equation of modernity with rational efficiency, science and technology and to neglect all the symbolic dimensions of contemporary technologies. (Morley, 2007, p. 293)

But it is precisely the symbolic dimension of technology that explains, for instance, the central place to which television is assigned in the home. Living rooms are mostly organized around the television set in Europe, and especially so in Morocco. You have essentially the same dynamic with the computer, which is usually sitting in the most precious place in the home. Research of the symbolic dimension of the internet cannot provide numbers and percentages, but it can help to explain *why*, for example, regardless of family income, such a high amount is spent for the purchase and use of technology. Explanatory patterns, which go beyond the statistical data and obvious usage tendencies, should result in the additional consideration of the symbolic dimension of the internet.

In this article, it will be argued that the symbolic dimension of the internet, and in a broader sense that of technology, is a result of the colonial encounter of the 19th and 20th century, when thought patterns were established in colonized as well as colonizing contexts. Therefore, the term postcolonial is put in front of mediatization in order to avoid reducing the postcolonial perspective to specifically describing only Morocco as being postcolonial.

However, the main focus is not on the symbolic dimension as such, but primarily on the constructedness of this dimension and its lasting impact. That is why I refer to the symbolic dimension as a discursive notion, as this implies consideration of existing power relations which are inherent in all discourse. The article then asks: How is the discursive notion of the internet constructed and to what extent do colonial patterns continue to exist to the present day?

I locate this question within the broader framework of mediatization. Therefore, the article starts out by clarifying the meaning of mediatization and of postcolonial theory. Since mediatization involves different kinds of dynamics depending on space and time, the country of Morocco will frame our discussion. To approach the discursive notion of the internet, three different perspectives on the internet are taken into consideration: that of young internet users, that of the Moroccan government, and that from a Moroccan children's book about the internet. Finally, conclusions will be drawn in terms of the question of how the identified patterns reproduce specific power relations.

2 Mediatization as a social and cultural approach

Without overemphasizing the role of the media, or centering on the media,¹ it is important to recognize that media do continue to play a crucial role, as our everyday life, our knowledge, and our perception are largely (technically) mediated. Since media are becoming more and more ubiquitous, mediatization – as I use the term – refers to the interplay of communicative changes, both social and political. Mediatization is a key term in order to grasp these ongoing social transformations in a rapidly changing communication environment (Hjarvard, 2008; Lundby, 2009).²

There is some linguistic as well as conceptual confusion as to whether to name and analyze the role of media in a media-saturated era as mediation or mediatization. Couldry (2008) and Livingstone (2009) agree upon using the term mediation. Livingstone (2009) prefers a broad concept of mediation that includes notions of mediatization. In her approach of a theory of mediation two claims are central: “First, the media mediate, entering into and shaping the mundane but ubiquitous relations among individuals and between individuals and society; and second, as a result, the media mediate, for better or for worse, more than before” (Livingstone, 2009, p. 6). Martín-Barbero (2003) suggests talking about mediations in plural in order to hint at power relations between hegemonic institutions and counter-hegemonic movements.

The term mediatization is used by Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999) and Schulz (2004). A first article analyzes the increasing power of media in political communication. Here, mediatization relates to the growing dependency of political institutions on mass media. Based on this, Schulz (2004) introduces mediatization as an analytical concept. For Schulz, it also refers to social change, in which media is a major factor. He describes mediatization as processes of extension, substitution, amalgamation and accommodation, relating this to functions performed by media. As he himself states, the functional dependencies and constraints (regarding technical semiotic and economic features of media functions) are results of the television era. After all, he concludes that his analytical concept based on functionalism is also applicable to new media technologies.

Hjarvard (2008) also uses the term ‘mediatization’ in order to develop a theory in which media are the agents of social and cultural change, but from

¹ This relates to the discussion of decentering, or non-media-centric, media studies; see Hepp (2013, pp. 132f.); Morley (2009).

² For an overview of the recent debates about mediation and mediatization, see Hepp (2013); Lundby (2009).

an institutional perspective. “The mediatization concept is applied exclusively to the historical situation in which the media at once have attained autonomy as a social institution and are crucially interwoven with the functioning of other institutions” (Hjarvard, 2008, p. 110). In his more recent publications, Hjarvard seems to have changed in his understanding of mediatization, suggesting that media as an institution have undergone fundamental changes in the last years, and that media as semi-autonomous institutions are integrated into other social institutions (Hjarvard, 2012, pp. 30 f.). He emphasizes that “a focus on mediatization may, nevertheless, help us to make sense of the proliferation of media in various sectors of culture and society” (Hjarvard, 2012, p. 33). In his 2013 published book entitled “The mediatization of culture and society”, he dedicates one chapter about mediatization to a new theoretical perspective (Hjarvard, 2013). Here, he shows that most recent discussions about mediatization, mainly promoted by Friedrich Krotz and Andreas Hepp, have led to a “more coherent and precise understanding of mediatization as a social and cultural process” (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 8).

Krotz’ (2009) concept of mediatization involves a social and cultural approach that encompasses, besides various sectors or institutions, the everyday life. Mediatization, as he understands it, is a long-term and meta-process – as is globalization, individualization, and commercialization. “[It] is grounded in the modification of *communication as the basic practice* of how people construct the social and cultural world” (Krotz, 2009, p. 25, emphasis in the original). Furthermore, Krotz promotes his understanding of mediatization as a broader theoretical approach. On the one hand, it encompasses a wide range of studies about media and social change and, on the other hand, systematizes preexisting knowledge. Krotz stresses three points: First, the focus lies on a complex media environment (not on a single medium); second, empirical research comprises different levels (micro, mezzo, and macro) of everyday life and society; and third, in addition to empirical descriptions, critical approaches are required.

Couldry (2012) also refers to Krotz’ concept of mediatization. While Couldry in 2008 chooses the term mediation instead of mediatization in order to understand the social potential of digital storytelling, he adopts the term mediatization in 2012. The strength of mediatization in the sense of Krotz lies in the avoidance of reducing media to any single media logic effecting social processes. Couldry emphasizes that, “[t]hrough the concept of mediatization, we acknowledge media as an irreducible dimension of all social processes” (Couldry, 2012, p. 137, emphasis in the original).

Likewise, Hepp (2013) elaborates on Krotz’ idea of mediatization as a meta-process and adds the term mediatization as panorama, which is derived from

Latour (2007). Both “relate to culture and society as a whole” (Hepp, 2013, p. 50). However, mediatization processes are in their manifold expressions absolutely dependent on a specific time and place. Generally, mediatization (at least in Europe) can be characterized by a quantitative increase in time for media use and availability, of accessible and integrated media spaces, and of technically mediated social relationships or institutions. The even more important qualitative aspects of change are described via the idea of “molding forces of media” (Hepp, 2013), which allows expressing a reciprocal relationship: The technical media structure “molds” the way we communicate, but the molding forces become concrete at the very moment of appropriation. This stresses once again the importance of context, since the appropriation or domestication of media relates very much to its context. Furthermore, this avoids a one-sided technical determination.

Following the argumentation of Krotz (2009), Couldry (2012) and Hepp (2013), mediatization can be viewed as neither a functional nor an institutional approach, and mediatization is not about a single logic emerging from the media and affecting every part of cultural and social space.

It is rather a cultural and social approach understood as a conceptual construct in order to theorize and systematize ongoing media and social change. As we live in a media-saturated era in Europe and beyond, one can no longer simply ask how media influence different social or cultural spheres; but rather, how processes of mediatization change and shift, yet also strengthen structures and power relations within everyday life and within different fields of society.

Within the concept of mediatization, I would like to draw attention to the symbolic dimension of media. As mediatization as a concept requires not only an empirical description, but also a critical perspective, I suggest referring to postcolonial theory as a critical approach on the one hand as well as a useful method on the other.

3 The postcolonial and the symbolic

In the first part of this section, I will illustrate the discursive development which put technology in the center of progress and modernity. In the second, the existence of a symbolic dimension will be more the focus as well as the method described, which is used to reconstruct the discursive notion of the symbolic dimension with reference to communication and information technology.

According to Fischer-Tiné (2010), postcolonial theory considers

colonialism not primarily as a form of domination and exploitation, but rather as a system of exerting power discursively which owed its success to the dissemination of a very

specific construction of difference, namely the depiction of the colonized as inferior and immature in comparison with their benevolent colonizers. (p. 3)

Material colonization was made legitimate by a discourse that presents colonialism as something giving the colonized freedom and progress. Colonization is, then, the triumph of science, rationality and humanism (do Mar Castro Varela and Dhawan, 2005). “European technology and knowledge are understood as symbols of a desirable progress” (do Mar Castro Varela and Dhawan, 2005, p. 15; translation by the author).

In his article “The West and the Rest: Discourse and power”, Stuart Hall (1992) investigates the role of the colonized within the emergence of modernity, saying “the west and the rest became two sides of a single coin” (Hall, 1992, p. 278). The West is a concept resulting from the colonial encounter rather than a geographical fact. Once this concept is established, it provides a certain structure of thinking, is effective in producing knowledge, and performs certain functions. As such, it functions as an image uniting different verbal as well as visual aspects into one picture. Furthermore, it allows classifying and ranking different societies, and acts as a benchmark for comparisons. The utilized criteria, Western vs. non-Western, are closely connected with positive and negative feelings: “‘the West’ = developed = good = desirable; or the ‘non-West’ = underdeveloped = bad = undesirable” (Hall, 1992, p. 277). After tracking the different historical stages which led to the emergence of the West, Hall addresses questions of power and discourse. With the same understanding as Foucault, the assertion is that any discourse cannot be innocent or neutral; it is not outside or inside power, but “one of the ‘systems’ through which power circulates” (Hall, 1992, p. 294). Hall exemplifies Foucault’s meaning of discourse by referring to Edward Said’s “Orientalism.”. After identifying discursive strategies, Hall stresses the importance of stereotyping. He quotes the “stereotyping dualism” of Hulme (1986), which is characterized by first portraying the specific essence of people and, second, by splitting this into binary pairs, such as good and bad, developed and under-developed, and so on (Hall, 1992, p. 308).

As a result of the above-mentioned splitting, it is important to note for this article that technology is an important part of the ‘good, the developed, the progress-side’ and Morocco is, as part of the rest, on the other, ‘underdeveloped’ side. Hence, technology is represented as a tool which allows – simplistically said – the rest to become the West.

David Morley does not directly refer to postcolonial theory but to the binary division of the world. He questions the “binary division [...] between worlds of, on the one hand, tradition, culture, ritual and irrationality and, on the other hand, the world of modernity, economics, functionality and rationality – which

is often seen as being inscribed in these technologies” (Morley, 2007, p. 3). The understanding of a modern world based on rationality, science, and secularization is caricatured by the use of media as something magical. “[B]eyond their practical uses, communication technologies often have symbolic meanings that make them function as powerful totems and fetishes of their owner” (Morley, 2007, p. 297). Morley gives another example for the power of the symbolic dimension: The Taliban government hung televisions from trees as a sign of “Westernization” that is not welcomed (Morley, 2007, p. 298). In addition to these different kinds of symbolism, it is said that seemingly rational, modern technology can also be appropriated for very traditional concerns, or in Morley’s words: “Old traditions [...] recruit new technologies to their purposes” (Morley, 2007, p. 296). Morley emphasizes that the technical things themselves have a symbolic function beyond modern rationality.

I want to look beyond the surface of “the new, the shiny, the symbolic” (Morley, 2007), and question how this has been discursively created. How are the symbolic dimensions of technology discursively constructed?

I suggest using the term discursive notion in order to refer to the meaning that technology carries beyond its technical structures, like a kind of connotation. This is not a given meaning, rather a discursively constructed one. Like discourse, the discursive notion is powerful, as it influences how people think about, and interact with, technology. Like in Edward Said’s “Orientalism” and Stuart Halls “The West and the Rest”, discourse analysis is a central method for postcolonial theory to debunk the colonial representational system. Detailed knowledge of the discursive mechanisms that pave the way for colonial hierarchy and have a lasting impact to present is of central interest in a critical postcolonial approach. That method is also used in this article by taking the example of an analysis of the discursive notion of the internet in Morocco. Three perspectives on the internet were considered: that of young Moroccan internet users, that of the Moroccan government and that from a Moroccan child’s book about the internet. This empirical material relates to my own extensive field research in Morocco from 2002 until today. While the statements and strategy papers of the Moroccan government are available on the internet, the statements of the Moroccan internet users come from interviews that I personally conducted in Morocco. The referred-to children’s book was published and is sold in Morocco. After providing some background information about Morocco, the material (interviews, strategy papers and speeches of the Moroccan king, a child’s book) is analyzed in terms of the representation of the internet.

4 Contextualized Morocco

It was argued that mediatization processes are very much dependent on context, and that social and cultural transformation can only be understood in relation to this context. With this as a framework, I will turn to Morocco.

Again, the postcolonial perspective was not only chosen as a descriptive tool of Morocco's colonial history because Morocco had been under French protectorate, which later turned into a classical form of colonization from between 1912 and 1956 – a colonial encounter that has had a lasting impact on both material as well as non-material dimensions of Morocco to this day. The postcolonial perspective was primarily chosen as an *analytical* tool to deconstruct forms of colonial impact on the discursive level. The starting point for this is the way places are described. Often, places that had been colonized are subsequently homogenized under an umbrella label such as 'Third World', 'Islamic world', and so on. However, a postcolonial view demonstrates the actual heterogeneity of such places.

Morocco is perceived as part of the Orient, but from the east, one has to turn westward to approach Morocco. Except for Ireland, Morocco lies, geographically speaking, more to the West than does Europe. This is precisely what Morocco means in Arabic: the west, which offers a bit of evidence that the Orient is a concept rather than a geographical position.

In geographical terms, Morocco is part of Africa – but it is the only country on the African continent which is not a member in the political institution of the African Union. Morocco is very close to Europe – the distance between Morocco and Europe is at its narrowest point only fourteen kilometers (nine miles) wide. Spain is even closer, when one considers that two Spanish cities (Ceuta and Melilla) are, as a consequence of colonial history, located on the Moroccan mainland. Morocco is a member of the Union for the Mediterranean, which encompasses member states of the European Union and Mediterranean partner countries. In cultural terms, Morocco is part of the Maghreb region, as is Tunisia and Algeria, which are linked by historical and linguistic ties. In a broader sense, Morocco is part of the Arab and Islamic worlds. Islam is an important reference point for Morocco, which has had influence on the region since the Islamic conquests in the late seventh century. To the present day, the ruling king is the head of state as well as the religious leader, claiming descent from the Islamic prophet Mohammed in order to legitimize his power.

In addition to these various regional geographical and political entanglements, the Moroccan population is exceptionally transnational, since one-tenth of its around 32 million inhabitants live outside the country. They do so mainly in European countries such as France, Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, and

Italy. Some also live in the United States and Canada, or in other Arab countries. The physical absence of Moroccans living abroad is compensated for by an enormous psychological presence. Approximately every second family has someone working and living most probably somewhere in Europe, sometimes already into the third generation. Since Moroccans abroad remain part of the households left behind, their transfer of information and money affects the whole family. They are ever-present when they spend their annual summer holidays back in Morocco, carrying with them new ideas, lifestyles, and goods. These emigrants living outside of Morocco are also very much integrated into Moroccan politics through voting, as well as remittances, which are one of the most important foreign revenues for Morocco. The Moroccan economy depends to a large extent on these remittances.

Morocco is, as I have shown, deeply transnational and transcultural, with manifold interconnections of individuals, as well as of institutions on a local, regional and global level.

Furthermore, Moroccan society is characterized by huge disparities. National average data for Morocco constantly fail to explain ongoing processes that are taking place under the surface of the national average. Like other countries in the region, Morocco has an extremely young society. Two-thirds of the population is under the age of thirty-five. Urban centers and metropolises like Casablanca, Rabat, Marrakesh, or Fes – where access to education, health services, and a functioning infrastructure are provided – lie adjacent to sparsely populated rural areas. The latter are inhabited by forty-five percent of the Moroccan population. Sharp distinctions between rural and urban areas, between different generations, and between males and females interact on multiple and often simultaneous levels, reinforcing or weakening inequalities. This is exemplified by the examination of Morocco's literacy rate, which is on average little higher than fifty percent, and generally higher for men than for women. The difference is even more pronounced with age and region of origin; in rural areas, elder women who can read and write are a major exception. Yet young people in urban areas – male and female alike – are in the majority literate. Discussion of literacy in Morocco is particularly complex because of the heterogeneous linguistic landscape. At least four languages are spoken: Standard Arabic, Moroccan Arabic, various Amazigh dialects, and French.

Being young in our present age usually means having access to (popular) cultural resources from around the globe. New media and communications systems and the digital revolution of the past two decades have made global styles and trends accessible to the majority of young people in Morocco as well. This holds true mainly for urban areas, but also for economically disadvantaged regions with deficient infrastructure.

Since internet use remains a rather urban phenomenon in present times, we shall now have a closer look at young, urban Moroccans. Many of them find themselves marginalized in society even though they may be well-educated and possess a university diploma. In their daily lives, young Moroccans often find themselves coming up against boundaries and restrictions, for example, in terms of access to the labor market. They are not yet part of the adult workforce. They live at home and lack sufficient money to marry and start their own families. Marriage is perceived as the only legitimate ritual to join the ‘adult world’ as well as the only accepted relationship with a partner. Since the age of marriage generally rises in urban areas as a result of economic hardship, young people feel the need for uncomplicated contacts. However, relations between men and women are highly regulated and sanctioned. Such regulated gendered behavior is thought to ensure normative and public order. Aside from economic poverty, it is more importantly a poverty of visions and options for the future that causes young Moroccans to turn to countries abroad. ‘Abroad’, which means Europe or North America to most young people, is often associated with the freedom to do what they want, and find personal as well as financial prosperity. How to emigrate is a major preoccupation for the young. They are faced with seemingly impenetrable geographical borders to Europe and North America, because there are hardly any legal ways to immigrate. If and when boundaries seem impenetrable, the internet is something that provides options for bypassing said boundaries, providing new opportunities on both material as well as immaterial dimensions.

5 Youth perspective on the internet

After having given relevant contextual information about Morocco and the situation of young people, I start now with their perspective on the internet. In order to show how the internet is perceived by young Moroccans, I refer to their appropriation of the internet, drawing from 60 semi-structured interviews that I conducted with Moroccan internet users in Fes during field research for my PhD project, “The appropriation of globally available resources in a local context. How young Moroccans use the internet.”³

In Moroccan urban areas, one witnesses a large number of young male and female internet users. For them, the internet has become an integral part of

³ The book was published in 2008 in German: Braune, I. (2008). *Aneignungen des Globalen. Internet-Alltag in der arabischen Welt. Eine Fallstudie in Marokko*. Bielefeld: transcript.

their everyday lives. This means that the internet – or, more precisely, the daily routine of visiting internet cafés and surfing the World Wide Web – increasingly structures young Moroccans’ daily lives. The everyday lives of Moroccan internet users are differently structured in that internet cafés offer new places to go and new ways of being. In addition, the young have broader access to new content, ideas, and images. In terms of structure and content, the horizon of what is reachable on a daily basis has been largely expanded.

In interviews conducted, I included a general question about the internet. Answers to the question, “What is the internet for you?” are here analyzed. They largely converge around a new ability to be in contact with the rest of the world.

The internet is a transport machine of my thoughts: I discuss with the world abroad, I discuss with everybody on the net. The world is getting small with the internet. And I improve my languages, French, English. (DialHaq, personal communication, July 5, 2004)

It is a space where I do have access to other cultures, to other people, to information. (Mohammed, personal communication, June 1, 2004)

The internet? To get in contact with people living abroad. (Amine, personal communication, June 23, 2004)

What shall I say? The internet is a big thing; it is the only way to stay in contact with my spouse in France. To phone would be too expensive. (Boushra, personal communication, May 7, 2004)

With the internet, young Moroccans are able to be in contact with the world; they have access to new perspectives, to new people, to new information. The possibility to use and improve their foreign languages as a foundation for contact with the rest of the world is very often mentioned. The internet is also appreciated as a tool with which it is possible to easily stay in contact with family members abroad. However, the main point made is that of a new involvement with the world. Without the internet, they would not feel connected with the world. They feel that rejection due to their place of origin in a developing country is overcome via the internet.

The internet is a thing – how should I say –, it is a technology that is really important to me and to the rest of the world. For us here in Morocco, the internet is very important and it is something really positive, like the television. Can you imagine somebody in Morocco who is living without TV? I don’t think so. You know the internet is for us something essential. We are part of the world with it. (Hisham, personal communication, July 27, 2004)

For others, the internet seems to be more magical, as it is perceived as a place where dreams can come true. Very often, access to the internet is described as

a turning point in life, since it gives the young people new visions of how their life could become what they dream of.

I love it. I will get to know my future husband in the internet. Of course, he lives in Europe and I will go to him and every now and again I will come back to Morocco to visit my family. It will be great. (Boushra, personal communication, July 23, 2004)

Even though this quotation might sound childish or be like a plot for a simple fairytale, it is a very common narration; and occasionally the story does come true, which makes it even more powerful.

Besides the fanciful nature of this story, the internet is indeed one way for young Moroccans to reach the places they dream of. Looking for a foreign spouse via the internet is one way to overcome the gap between the developed and developing world. Moreover, spending time in internet cafes and surfing the net is thought of as a useful pastime; more so than doing nothing due to limited options in a poor labor market.

The next passage refers to social pressure for acceptable gender behavior in public. Since the relationship between males and females in public is a highly sensitive issue when they are not married, access to the internet has developed into having a specific meaning. Whenever gender relations are strongly regulated and public infractions of these rules are punished, openness of the internet constitutes new spaces for experiences – for women and men alike.

On the internet I find my total freedom. You can express anything you want. There are no reasons to lie – no social restriction which imposes expectation. On the street it is only blah blah blah, superficial jabbering; contact to girls is impossible. Their brothers would fight me. So I go to the net for a real exchange of ideas. I am really interested in different points of view. And honestly speaking, it keeps me alive. You know, I am jobless, nothing to do the whole day. Instead of hanging out on the streets, I go to the internet. It is a kind of distraction, too. (Mohammed, personal communication, May 7, 2004)

How young Moroccans appropriate the internet against the backdrop of their daily situation is characterized by the problems and boundaries they are faced with. Their activities in cyberspace are a consequence of their daily marginalization. Hence, the internet is used to overcome the limitations that are otherwise built into their lives. The young people have taken control, and have occupied a place where they can renegotiate the terms of their existence, whether by finding a job, a foreign marriage partner, or a place at a university abroad to bridge the way to the ‘good, modern, and developed’ world. The internet brings young Moroccans closer to the places they dream of. It allows them to take part in the (post-) modern world, and to keep up with Europe and North America – at least virtually – when talking with other people on the internet.

6 Telecommunication at the heart of progress

“Telecommunication at the heart of progress” (*Les télécommunications au cœur du progrès*) is one of the slogans with which the Moroccan national agency regulating telecommunication (Agence nationale de réglementation des télécommunications, ANRT) advertises. This title provides a first indication of how information and communication technology is perceived by the Moroccan government, and also how the Moroccan government actively promotes its definition of information and technology.

With an aim to illustrate the discursive notion from the governmental perspective, a short overview of the development of the internet in Morocco is necessary. To demonstrate the structures of the discursive notion of the internet, or more generally of information and communication technology (ICT), different documents were considered and analyzed. Thus, I refer to speeches and messages from King Mohammed VI and to national strategy papers from the past six years. Here, in governmental discourse, the internet is not separated from the more complex information and communication technology system. Hence, this analysis references the broader term, which includes the internet.

We must enable our country with the capacity to operate with new technologies, which can be utilized in an optimal manner to open up the vast possibilities of success that they offer. This will assure our great people the capacity to develop and to integrate with a global market, which will provide Maroc [*sic*] with the means to occupy its place in a world that is being transformed by the ‘digital revolution’. (King Mohammed VI, public speech, 2002, as cited in Maroon, 2009, p. 299)

The internet was officially introduced into Morocco in 1995. In the national strategy paper *E-Morocco 2010*, this is expressed as follows: “Early in the 1990s our country became aware of the importance of ICT for its future” (Ministry of Industry, Trade and New Technologies, 2007, p. 9). The young King Mohammed VI supported the introduction of the new technology from the very beginning, and the government has been prioritizing initiatives to increase the telecommunications sector in the country. As such, the internet in Morocco, unlike in many other Arab countries, was and is scarcely subject to censorship. Besides providing free access to the internet, the new information and communication technologies are perceived as a vital economic sector. In a royal announcement in 2009, King Mohammed VI expressed the necessity to consider ICT as very productive for creating an information society: “[I]t is not a banal product of consumption” (Mohammed VI, 2009).

The statistical development of internet usage in Morocco demonstrates strenuous efforts by the Moroccan government to promote information and communication technology as an economically vital sector as well as an important tool for the general population to be able to participate in a knowledge-based society. In the year 2000, less than one percent of the population had access to internet. Four years later, ten percent were using it. By 2007, a quarter of the Moroccan population was using the internet, while the latest numbers from 2011 indicate this to be at fifty-one per cent. This is by far the highest percentage in the region, much higher than, for instance, in Tunisia (thirty-nine percent) or Egypt (thirty-nine percent).⁴

What I have already said about national average data for Morocco also holds true for these numbers. The number of young urban internet users would be much higher than the national average. Remarkable is the low number of internet subscriptions, which is fewer than two percent. This provides a clear indication that the internet is often used in internet cafés. Indeed, internet cafés, with names like Friendship, London Cyber, or Al-Baraka (the blessing), are the most visible aspect of the rapid growth of internet use. Internet cafés are very popular mainly because most private homes still do not have a computer, let alone an internet connection. Even though the number of private internet connections is rising, internet cafés are still popular.

The Moroccan government is convinced that “ICT has an essential role to play in the process of modernization, the upgrading operation and the creation of wealth” (Ministry of Industry, Trade and New Technologies, 2007, p. 9). In order to coordinate and strengthen all efforts regarding promotion of the ICT sector, the Moroccan government drafts national strategies (for instance, *E-Morocco 2010* for the years 2007 to 2010, and *Maroc Numeric 2013* for the period from 2010 to 2013). The scope of the strategies includes national economy matters to the growth potential of the ICT sector, but also implications for the population and the administration (think e-government). Regarding the latter two subjects, reduction of financial costs is of main importance, be it for private use or for the Moroccan government. In the period between 2007 and 2010, focus was placed on providing access to information. This was underlined with the subtitle: “Towards building our information and knowledge society”:

The acceleration of technological innovation and its globalization involve great hopes: more open society, effective administration and expanding economy. Besides, at the current post-industrial era, access to information has become the major source of creating

⁴ Website from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>.

wealth, while immaterial investment is more important than material investment. No country would hence be able to afford ignoring information society and its consequences; otherwise, it is doomed to decline. (Ministry of Industry, Trade and New Technologies, 2007, p. 9)

In the years to come, another main area of work is to promote the importance of the digital revolution for the whole economy, as well as ICT as its own vital sector. This is mirrored in the national strategy *Maroc Numeric 2013*.

The usage of information technology is an essential factor on the way to a knowledge society. It is able to make an active contribution to human development, to the enhancement of social cohesion and to the growth of the national economy. (Ministère de l'Industrie, du commerce et des nouvelles technologies, 2009, p. 8)

It is obvious that in the governmental language, information and communication technology is intensively linked with modernization, wealth, and progress. Material as well as immaterial aspects are stressed simultaneously. It seems unquestionable that the only path to economic as well as personal wealth is that of knowledge. Advancement is achievable with the help of knowledge and new technology; otherwise the country would be faced with decline. However, while the technology itself symbolizes modernity and progress, it is at the same time the medium through which to obtain it.

The government's declarations about information and communication technology are marked by certain euphoria. Few and far between, global imbalances are addressed:

Indeed, all over the globe, access to and the real usage of information determine progress and development. Modernity and prosperity are presented with the increased capability to produce and use information. [...] Nevertheless, there exists an immense disequilibrium between the industrial and emerging countries. (Ministère de l'Industrie, du commerce et des nouvelles technologies, 2009, p. 8)

If global imbalances are considered, the world is divided into two parts: industrial vs. emerging countries, or the West and the Rest. It is clear that Morocco has yet to belong to the developed countries. King Mohammed VI explained at a conference of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC): "For the purpose of the dialogue of the cultures, the opening up to the development of the information technologies is considered of utmost importance, as well as the will to cooperate – to mutual benefit – with the developed world" (Mohammed VI, 2009).

This representation recalls colonial patterns and a binary splitting into developed vs. undeveloped. The lasting power of this segmentation of the world is apparent here.

7 Our friend, the internet

For a third perspective on the discursive notion of the internet in Morocco, I refer to a children's book, which gave the article its title: *Our friend, the internet* ("Notre ami, l'Internet"). This 16-page-book is part of a series providing children with basic knowledge about their surroundings. First in the series is the mentioned "Our friend – the internet"; other episodes consider friends, a newborn, nature, water, and food. It is written in French and dedicated to young children. The story is underlined with colored pictures. For the purpose of interpretation and analysis, here is a short summary:

The story is centered on an oversized young girl, who is living in "the land of the day". She is so oversized that she is able to reach into the sky to help move the clouds to places where the farmers need rain. Despite this ability, she has but one wish: to become like normal children her age. She dreams of playing with them, of singing and dancing with them at birthday parties. But what could she do to make this true? One day she reads in a journal something about a place called "the land of the night" where there is only night. With this new information she goes straight to the internet, because she knows that she will be able to find anything she wants on the internet. She types in land of the night and almost instantly she gets a full range of information and even contact with a young boy living in that country. This boy is unusually small, and both have a mutual laughing fit when they eventually see each other. Nevertheless, the young boy asks the girl to be his friend. The girl agrees on the condition that they both find a solution so that they can become normal children and their countries normal countries.

They arrange a meeting and the oversized girl puts the little boy on the palm of her hand and raises him to the sun. Face to face with the sun, the little boy makes a request: "Oh, you nice sun, you biggest source of energy. Without you, mankind, the animals, the flowers would have already disappeared. [...]. I traveled 150 million kilometers to come to this place, and do so with the request for you to shine in my country. This is so the inhabitants will no longer have to be in a state without any actions ..." The sun replied: "So be it. It will be like you want it, my dear." (Benjelloun, 2002, p. 12)

From this time on, day and night rotate around the globe. And a little while later, the boy and the girl – both having become normal-sized kids – find each other in a beautiful garden with fragrant flowers. They are very happy that they were able to fulfill their most precious dreams in life.

Although the book is published as part of a series which aims to provide children with essential knowledge, it is very fanciful and not based on facts. The story about the internet is presented like a fairytale, opening space for a

child's fantasy – as well as for scholarly interpretation. Before providing two readings of the story, let us examine in analysis on how the internet is being presented.

It is striking that the internet is not explicitly introduced, and it appears only in a short sequence at the beginning of the story. There only, the word “internet” is mentioned twice in one short paragraph. In this paragraph, characteristics of the internet are presented:

The internet allows the immediate connection with pages of the whole world. It provides information about everything, be it about history, geography, mathematics, medicine and other domains of knowledge. It allows even to watch pictures, fixed and animated, and films – to listen to music, to play games, and to write letters. In this sense, the internet offers the possibility to ‘navigate’ through the libraries and museums. It is a treasure trove of knowledge, virtually unlimited. (Benjelloun, 2002, pp. 7 f.)

This is all the information provided about the internet. It provides access to the entire world with unlimited information about everything within. Furthermore, many online activities can be enjoyed, such as listening to music, watching films, and so on. The internet is very much associated with information and knowledge.

At this point, noteworthy is what is not mentioned regarding the internet. The conditions of internet use are completely ignored; this includes technical requirements for access, as well as the skills needed to use it. Also, the question of financial costs and possible immaterial restrictions (for instance, language barriers) remain unaddressed.

Whatever is or is not mentioned about the internet, in the course of the story it symbolizes a turning point. It is the medium through which the children come in contact with each other, which finally leads to the fulfillment of their most important dreams. Simply put: without the internet, there is no happy ending. It is a tool, and if it is reasonably used, it can solve problems and create a good future.

Considering the entire story, I suggest two readings. The first is a bit more abstract and uses a simplified colonial hierarchy as frame of reference. Hence, the world is divided into two parts; one side is bright, where the sun shines and the other is dark. Because of the permanent night, the inhabitants have no energy for any kind of activity. The girl from the bright side, which in this version of the story symbolizes a former colonial power, is big – while the boy, who is colonized, is very small. Of course, the bright side has access to the technology, and that is the side from which the initial activity starts.

But we have to add that both sides are unsatisfied with their initial situation. They both agree that they are witnessing a very imbalanced situation.

While the day side feels the need of the moon and the stars, the other side requires the sun as source of energy. When they come together, they create in common a well-balanced world, in which both are happy. This could even be understood as a postcolonial happy ending: Both sides reinvent themselves and bring a new world into being.

The second interpretation is borrowed from the everyday life of young Moroccans and looks at the story from a gender perspective. In this reading, it seems reminiscent of a story which is told in every internet café. It can be summarized as such: Via the internet you get to know your future spouse, who preferably lives in Europe. After getting to know each other virtually, the marriage follows as a real act with a large celebration. A formerly empty life is replaced by a happy and prosperous existence somewhere else other than Morocco.

It is a modern myth that comes true every now and then – almost everybody knows someone who knows someone who currently lives presumably satisfied in Europe. This makes the story very powerful. Regarding the gender dimension in this story, it ought to be pointed out that it is the girl who lives in the bright world, and it is she who begins the activity of changing her unhappy situation. She uses her access to the internet to make the first step. This can be understood as a counter-hegemonic feature within the context of the Moroccan society, where the woman is traditionally selected by the man for marriage.

Irrespective of whether the first or the second interpretation is preferred, the role of the internet is the same in both, and very powerful: It is the tool allowing contact with others in the world, and the bridging of both material and immaterial distances. It ultimately facilitates and leads to a prosperous future.

8 Conclusion

All three perspectives on the internet share a very positive view. Young Moroccans appreciate the internet for making the world easily accessible. For them, the internet is primarily a tool of participation, namely in the modern world. In the eyes of the Moroccan government, the internet is part of the very promising information and telecommunications sector at the center of progress. From its perspective, the internet refers to knowledge as foundation for progress in material as well as non-material dimensions. And in the children's book, the internet helps to break down inequalities in fulfilling one's most precious dreams. It symbolizes progress, while at the same time being the tool to reach it. The discursive notion here is composed of exceedingly positive attributes, as men-

tioned – participation and progress, but also prosperity and a happy future. It is worth noting that the power and dynamic of the discursive notion is also derived from what is not being mentioned. Issues like restrictions inside and outside of the internet, and material as well as non-material requirements, are not addressed.

The meaning of these answers can best be understood when drawing on the postcolonial frame. It was argued that material exploitation is supported by discursively exerted power. One of the results of this colonial encounter was the division of the world into the West and the Rest. This splitting was combined with value judgments such as the good, developed, and desired – and their counterparts. I am most aware that these categories are selective and simplifying, and that they may change over time. But present examples of the discursive notion of the internet in Morocco show how this concept of distinctiveness continues to work up to the present day. The argumentation of the young Moroccans as well as of the Moroccan government shows to what extent such distinctions are internalized.

Both young Moroccans as well as the Moroccan government argue from a viewpoint in the inferior and underdeveloped world. They are not yet part of the desired developed world, so they need tools to express their longing for the world to which they want to belong. This is the point where the term discursive notion is able to explain existing power relations. I argue, referring to Morley, that communication technology has even in the ‘rational, secular, developed’ countries a symbolic meaning. However, this is different from the perspective of someone who does not feel part of the modern, developed world. For them, technology is a vehicle to symbolize their involvement in a modern world. Technology guarantees that involvement.

Another essential remark is to be made here. Technology is seen as a tool to bridge the gap, but not as a tool to question the idea behind the concept of the binary distinction. I would even argue that this internalized mindset blocks the way of thinking about alternatives for different modernities, instead of following the path to the modernity. This shows once again how powerful the concept of the West and the Rest functions to the present day. It provides criteria and benchmarks of ranking and classifying societies on the way to the West.

It has been claimed that discourse and the discursive notion are powerful because they influence how people think about, and interact with, a certain thing. It is due to the discursive notion that the Moroccan government invests massively in information and communication technology. The Moroccan government is definitely convinced that ICT is a part of, and leads to, material and non-material progress, based on the irreversible evolution to a knowledge society. Another example, dealing with the issue of how the discursive notion of

the internet structures behavior, is the social acceptance of internet cafés. No other free-time activity simultaneously attended by males and females is accepted besides using the internet at internet cafés, which as non-gender-divided spaces are much appreciated. Especially the parental generation of current internet users associates the internet as an educative tool that ensures success for the future. Both situations cannot be explained by the technical structure of information technology or by national average data. Rather, it is the discursively structured meaning of the internet that makes sense in these cases.

Regarding the discussion on mediatization, the discursive notion provides an important dimension for detecting qualitative aspects of media and social change. It may help to localize challenges and inconsistencies arising from rapidly changing media and social landscapes.

Bionote

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