Mediated Muslim martyrdom : Rethinking digital solidarity in the “Arab Spring”

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Article

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Abstract
In today's world of networked, mobile, and global digital communication, Muslim martyrdom as a multi-layered communicative practice has experienced a new type of media saturation, thereby posing a challenge for the study of media, religion, and culture in a digital age. In this article, the analysis focuses on two cases of high symbolic relevance for the events later referred to as the "Arab Spring"—the deaths of a Tunisian fruit seller Mohammed Bouazizi and a young Egyptian man Khaled Saeed. Special focus is given to the discussion of digital solidarities and their construction in circulation and remediation of martyr narratives of Bouazizi and Saeed in diverse media contexts. In this global development of digital solidarities, we identify two categories of martyr images of particular relevance—a "living martyr" and a "tortured martyr"—and discuss their resonance with different historical, religious, cultural, and political frames of interpretation. In conclusion, we reflect on the question of the ethics of global mediation of Muslim martyrdom and its implications for the study field of media, religion, and culture in its digital state.

Keywords
Arab Spring, digital communication, digital solidarity, distant suffering, global mediation, Muslim martyrdom

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Introduction

The idea of martyrdom is deeply rooted in the history of all three Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In the history of Muslim martyrdom, the belief of symbolic death that has the power to amalgamate profound religious, cultural, and political aspirations is traditionally communicated through traditional oral stories and books (Cook, 2007; Mitchell, 2012a). In today's world of networked, mobile, and global digital communication, Muslim martyrdom as a multi-layered communicative practice has experienced a new type of media saturation, thereby posing a challenge for the study of media, religion, and culture in a digital age (Kraidy, 2016; Campbell and Lövheim, 2011; Mitchell, 2009, 2012a, 2012b).

In Tunis, Egypt, and the wider Arab world, the protests in 2010 and 2011 and subsequent changes in the government are generally referred to as the "Arab Spring" (see, for example, Alexander, 2012; Echchaibi, 2013). We argue that in this process, mediating martyrdom in and via the digital media and the Internet played a significant symbolic role in articulating the shared feeling of anger and frustration surrounding injustice, torture, and humiliation by the ruling elite, thereby fueling imaginaries of solidarity and subsequent political events (see also, Kraidy 2016; Halverson et al., 2013). Many analyses of digital media and the Arab uprisings (e.g. Lim, 2012; Lotan et al., 2011; Poell and Van Dijck, 2015; Tufecki and Wilson, 2012) emphasize the capacities of digital media, thereby focusing on the nature of networks, speed of information flow, and issues of information control and their relevance for facilitating political action in the Arab uprisings. In this article, we give special emphasis to the discussion of digital solidarities and their construction in circulation and remediation of martyr narratives in diverse media contexts. These solidarities, established and maintained around sharing martyr narratives communicated through images, played a significant role in the North African context, the Arab Muslim world, and the Muslim diaspora, but also in the so-called "West." In this global development of digital solidarities, we identify two categories of martyr images of particular relevance—a "living martyr" and a "tortured martyr"—and discuss their resonance with different historical, religious, cultural, and political frames of interpretation.

Our empirical investigation is based on media ethnographic analysis of a number of online sites that contributed to circulating martyr deaths during the political upheaval (e.g. Al Jazeera Arabic/English, CNN, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and Wikipedia). These materials were collected during the events of the Arab Spring from January 2011 to May 2011. The analysis focuses on two cases of high symbolic relevance—the suicide protest by a Tunisian fruit seller Mohammed Bouazizi and the death of a young Egyptian man Khaled Mohamed Saeed after he was beaten by the police. These cases were not first occasions or even rare, as many common people in North African countries had been tortured and killed due to police violence during previous years. Moreover, other public suicides had been committed to protest against the tyranny. What makes the two deaths discussed here particularly relevant is that they were transformed into transnational or even global martyr deaths in the complex interaction among different communication platforms (digital media), communication phenomena (visual communication, narratives), and shared imaginaries (of multiple solidarities around suffering) (see, for example, Kraidy 2016; Halverson et al., 2013: 313).

Here, we begin with the premise that the digital media and the Internet played a crucial role in making visible the torture and humiliation of Bouazizi and Saeed, thereby breaking the taboo and the collective silence around the state violence (on taboo, see, e.g. Douglas, 2002 [1966]). The "world" was made to witness the suffering and torture of these Muslim men on the screen. This article discusses *how* these two public deaths were transformed in and via the Internet into mediated symbolic events of martyrdom in a Muslim community and a wider global audience, and how they created and maintained new compassions and solidarities around suffering in the context of global digital media. The key concepts for the analysis are *visual mediation* and media *witnessing* (Chouliaraki, 2013; Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009; Meyer, 2013; Mitchell, 2005; Peters, 2009). In conclusion, we reflect on the question of the ethics of global mediation of Muslim martyrdom and its implications for the study field of media, religion, and culture in its digital state.

The many faces of Muslim martyrdom

In the Muslim cultural sphere, martyrdom is a phenomenon that has many faces. This article attempts to contribute to the study of martyrdom in the research field of media, religion, and culture (Mitchell, 2009, 2012b; cf. Bunt, 2000, 2003). In this research tradition, special emphasis is given to a close interplay between media and religion, particularly to the mediation of religion in visual communication (Hoover, 2013; Meyer, 2013; Morgan, 2008). In line with an anthropologist of religion, Birgit Meyer (2013), we approach martyr death as a mediated visual communication practice lived and experienced in a multitude of media-saturated cultural, social, and political contexts. In Islam, the idea of a close interrelation among religious, cultural, and political spheres is highly relevant, and this can be illustrated by providing an etymological example. The "*Din wa dawla"*—a concept used in Arab countries—expresses the teachings of Islam as something not only limited to the mosque (*din*), and hence the religious sphere, but also as something that is applicable to the state (*dawla*), for example, the political sphere (cf. Hirschkind, 2001).

At the core of mediation in Muslim, martyr deaths are the idea of "witnessing," which is closely associated with "self-sacrifice." A symbolic martyr, someone who gives one's life, represents something beyond an individual end of biological life (Cook, 2007; Middleton, 2011). From the perspective of classical sociology, martyr death can be approached as an altruistic act that overcomes the human need to survive. It anchors two symbolic aspects: strength and purity. In sacrificing his or her life, a martyr shows self-discipline and self-mastery (Hatina, 2014: 4). Durkheim's (1951 [1897]) classical work *Le suicide* also offers a valuable perspective for understanding Muslim martyr death in relation to community dynamics. According to Durkheimian thinking, "altruistic suicide" is a radical expression of group solidarity. By sacrificing his or her life, the individual helps the community to identify with its collective values (Hatina, 2014: 4).

As a historical phenomenon, martyr death has deep roots, and its meaning and content has varied in the course of history. Today, there is no single universally shared definition of Muslim martyrdom (Mitchell, 2009: 82; Middleton, 2011: 5–6). In the North African region, the idea of martyrdom has been influenced by diverse historical periods, cultures, and religious traditions as the region has a vivid history of different ethnic and tribal peoples occupying the area as well as the expansion of Roman civilization as well as the Ottoman period. These pagan, pre-Islamic and/or Christian ideas and narratives

(particularly of Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt) have also added layers to the interpretive frame of martyrdom in the North African region (Halverson et al., 2013: 322–326). Hatina (2014: 12–13) argues that much of the existing literature on *modern* Muslim martyrdom is devoted to the perception of *jihad* in the present age. Scholars who have dealt with martyrdom have done so in the specific context of "suicide" bombers, a phenomenon which, in his view, has profoundly shaped the imagination of the public and the academic research community interested in modern Muslim martyrdom (cf. Ingram, 2013).

Martyrdom as mediated communication

Mediation, as Birgit Meyer (2013: 4) calls it, is of crucial significance in understanding martyrdom as a communicative practice. Drawing on Meyer (2013), and many others, we argue that all communication of martyrdom is always somehow mediated, as there is no communication by immediate intuition and the implications cannot be transmitted directly from mind to mind (also see Lundby, 2014: 7). It is also important to acknowledge that the process of mediation is never neutral, let alone inconsequential. The manner in which mediation is implemented influences people's experience of the social world. Thompson (1995: 4) reminds us that the use of a certain kind of communication media (digital media and the Internet in this article) always involves a certain type of action and interaction in the social world, a certain type of social relationships, and certain ways of relating to others and to oneself. Following Thompson's insight, we argue that the use of digital media and the Internet particularly transforms the *spatial* and *temporal* organization of social life around Muslim martyrdom (also see Bennet and Segerberg, 2012). Thus, new forms of religious action, interaction, and exercise of power emerge and push the boundaries of a common physical locale (Thompson, 1995: 4). Such an uncoupling of space and time related to digitally mediated martyrdom creates a new kind of *digitally re-spatialized simultaneity* among its witnesses. By further developing Thompson's (1995: 32) idea of despatialization, we argue that this uncoupling of space and time—in which the experience of simultaneity is re-negotiated from its spatial condition of common locality—makes it possible to witness martyr death "here and now" on the screen, despite the fact that this event has occurred in a spatially remote locality. Thus, a new sense of "momentum" as "now" emerges in which there is no longer a physical boundary to a particular locale. Consequently, simultaneity extends in space and ultimately becomes global in scope.

Furthermore, a new type of "*mediated sociality*" around communicating martyrdom is put forward. In mediated sociality, the sense of the communities with which people share a common path—for example, a common religious origin and common fate—is altered. By witnessing the suffering of a martyr in and via digital media and the Internet, people may, at least in principal, feel themselves to belong to communities that are created around certain religiously inspired imaginaries, which are constituted, at least partially, by witnessing mediated martyrdom from a distance in and via global digital media (cf. Thompson, 1995: 35).

Iconography in Muslim martyrdom

In the history of Muslim martyrdom, martyrdom has been mediated mainly through oral stories and literary sources. However, the role of visual communication, particularly

images, has been rather controversial in the history of this religion. Images in pagan religions were considered as a source of idolatry and, hence, condemned in The Quran.[1] Some theological interpretations within Islam, such as fundamentalist Sunni sects among Salafis and Wahhabis, assume rigorous positions on visual images of created beings, banning even television as non-Islamic. Most Islamic communities and theological interpretations propound absolute prohibition to make visual images of God, Prophet Muhammad, or other Islamic prophets and relatives of Muhammad (see, for example, Esposito, 2011: 14–15). However, the Quran does not explicitly prohibit the description of human images or figures. This has lead to different explanations of what *aniconism*, a proscription against the creation of images of sentient beings, is and should be in Islam.

In recent years, the Internet-based digital communication and social networking sites have opened new possibilities for communicating martyrdom in the Middle East and North African countries and beyond. New type of visual media such as mobile and digital photography has become everyday practice, particularly among the youth in the North Africa and the broader Arab Muslim world. Digital photographs and online videos portraying people are used regularly in diverse publications and Internet platforms for religious, cultural, and political purposes (Halverson et al., 2013: 326).

One example of an iconic image in modern Muslim martyr iconography is a full life portrait of a "living martyr," in which the martyr is portrayed gazing out at the viewer. The iconic images of the Al-Banna and Qutb belong to this category. The living martyr images as a genre of visual martyrology are used in a variety of practices of communicating martyrdom (mourning, social bonding, religious, and political emancipation) among Muslim communities in different regions of North Africa and the wider Arab Muslim world in a digital era. Hence, the digital and visual mediation of modern martyrdom is transformed into *ubiquitous*, *mobile*, and *interactive* cultural, religious, and political practices. Furthermore, the social interaction around these living martyr images is becoming more *immediate*, *interconnected*, and *responsive* (also see Lövheim, 2013: 155). Interesting interrelations among different online sites and between online and offline worlds have being formed in this circulation of living martyr images (cf. Campbell and Lövheim, 2011).

Media witnessing

Muslim martyrdom—whether mediated via old or new media, texts, or images—cannot be understood without the concept of witnessing. It is the witnessing of death and suffering that is at stake in the symbolic communication of martyrdom. In Muslim martyrdom, witnessing includes two levels. On one hand, an individual who sacrifices his or her life oneself gives testimony of the injustices of the world; on the other hand, his or her actions and related suffering are witnessed by others. The task of those who give testimony to the suffering of the other is to narrate his or her fate and thus identify with the values communicated in the act of suffering and death (Hatina, 2014).

Characteristic of mediating martyrdom in digital media is that the act of witnessing the suffering occurs on and via the Internet. This is termed *media witnessing* (Ellis, 2009; Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009; Peters, 2009~~1~~).**[AQ1]** It requires an agent who witnesses, a witnessing representation, and an audience who receives and/or accepts the witness. Most importantly, media witnessing changes the condition of witnessing by reformulating the category of "being there." Media witnessing is typically acted out in systematic and ongoing reporting of the experiences and realities of more or less *distant*

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others to mass audiences or masses of different types of audiences (Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009: 1). Moreover, media witnessing entails expressing an experience in language (or image, for that matter) for the benefit of those who were "not there."

Ashuri and Pinchevski (2009: 133–135) discuss vicarious witnessing in relation to mediated communication (cf. Chouliaraki, 2015). According to them, vicarious witnessing acknowledges a crucial connection between the media—namely, visual media that provides visual evidence—and the audience whose role is to receive and/or accept that evidence, whether in the form of a film, video, or a still image. Furthermore, Hatina (2014: 7) emphasizes the communicative approach in witnessing martyrdom:

> ... martyr has no existence without memorialization, commemoration, and narration. ... the martyr can no longer speak, his/her mission now shifts to his/her representatives, who deal with the politics of martyrdom. The martyr becomes part of the community's official memory. He/she is presented as someone who, by a publicly witnessed death, conveyed a deterrent message of determination, commitment, and non-submission to the enemy while simultaneously serving as a model worthy of imitation and a recruitment agent of future martyrs.

Mohammed Bouazizi and Khaled Saeed as mediated martyrs

Here, we examine two empirical cases of mediated martyrdom and the related witnessing in the context of digital media. These two public deaths of young Muslim men began circulating in digital media and the Internet in the North African Muslim countries and beyond in 2010 and 2011. They both received massive visibility on local, national, transnational, and global levels, through active dissemination among numerous media actors, ranging from individuals and activists to professional media producers such as Al Jazeera and BBC. Through the process of intensified visual mediation, related vicarious witnessing, and narrative framing, these two deaths were transformed into symbolic death events of Muslim martyrdom. Mediated experiences of *re-spatialized simultaneity* and *sociality* were created, thereby making new digital solidarities that eventually transformed into political protests in Tunis and Egypt—an event subsequently referred to as the "Arab Spring."

Tunisian vendor sets himself on fire

Mohamed Bouazizi was a Tunisian street vendor who set himself on fire in front of a government building on 17 December 2010, protesting the confiscation of his wares. Bouazizi was a poor 26-year-old Tunisian who could not find a job after finishing college. He refused to join the "army of unemployed youth" but instead started a small business, without a license, as a street vendor selling vegetables to support his family. He set himself on fire after being publicly harassed by the police, who attempted to deny his right to do business in the streets. Bouazizi died of his burns on 4 January 2010.

Economic stagnation was breeding dissatisfaction in Tunis, and Mohamed Bouazizi's act can be described as *symbolizing the vulnerability of the ordinary people*. His death was interpreted as being against the monarchs and presidents in North African countries, who were largely perceived as unjust rulers who enjoyed considerable economic privileges and defended themselves against the people through violent security apparatus.

Bouazizi remained in hospital for 18 days, fighting severe burns over his entire body. President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali visited him in hospital and a photo of the meeting was released by the presidency. Crucial in transforming Bouazizi's death into that of a martyr was a wide circulation of a photograph in which he lay badly burnt in the hospital just before he died. The photo became one of the iconic images of his suffering and vulnerability.

Another type of martyr image that was given considerable visibility in the diverse platforms of digital media was a portrait of Bouazizi as a "living martyr." In these images, he was smiling at the camera. In addition, Bouazizi's portrait was frequently used as a centre piece for a shrine. Often, these images contained user-added texts that made explicit reference to his martyrdom. These user-generated modifications, circulations, and remixes—in other words, productive engagement with media artefacts—illustrated the role of the ordinary people in the making of Bouazizi's martyrdom (Halverson et al., 2013: 317; also see Mitchell, 2005).

The martyr narrative of Bouazizi captured by both social and mainstream media[2] played an important role in the mediation and creation of Bouazizi's martyrdom narrative during the days he was hospitalized before his death.[3] Soon after his death, Al Jazeera made a documentary, and news stories on his death were told. His mother and family members played an important role in the public narration of Bouazizi's martyrology: "I don't want Mohamed's death to be wasted," said his mother, Menobia Bouazizi. According to Bouazizi's mother, his death was not motivated by poverty but by his public humiliation.

In our analysis, Mohamed Bouazizi's death can best be described as the narrative of martyrdom of *courage*, *dignity*, and *resistance* against the unjust political system. Many international media actors further enforced this interpretive frame. Bouazizi was posthumously awarded The European Parliament Sakharov Prize 2011 jointly along with four others for his and their contributions to "historic changes in the Arab world." Moreover, *The Times* of the United Kingdom named Bouazizi "Person of 2011."

Bouazizi's martyrology was related to ideas of altruism and self-sacrifice. In Durkheim's (1951 [1897]) lexicon, Bouazizi's death can be interpreted as an "altruistic suicide" in which an individual dies for the sake of the community, thereby representing the collective values and beliefs of the community. Bouazizi was a "people's martyr" fighting against the injustice of society (the elite) and corrupt power apparatus of the ruling elite, who neglected the people's needs. "Mohammed gave his life to draw attention to his condition and that of his brothers," his uncle Mr Horchani told Agence France-Presse (AFP). YouTube videos, news clips, and short documentaries were a crucial part of circulating this martyrology. The intensive digital mediation of his death brought waves of solidarity in North Africa and the Middle East. Bouazizi's death incited demonstrations and riots throughout Tunisia in protest of social and political issues in the country that lead to President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's resignation on 14 January 2011, after 23 years in power.

The postmortem image that became "The face that launched a revolution"

Khaled Saeed was a 28-year-old middle-class Egyptian man, who was tortured to death by the Egyptian police in Alexandria in June 2010. Saeed was sitting on the second floor of a cyber café. Earlier, he had posted a video online of police officers and drug dealers

working together. This enraged the police, and they took revenge on him. Two detectives from the Sidi Gaber police station entered the premises and arrested him. Multiple witnesses testified that the police beat Saeed to death by "smashing his head against stairs, a wall, and an iron door."[4]

According to Egyptian media,[5] Saaed's family visited his body in the morgue, and his brother took pictures of the corpse using his mobile phone. In these graphic images, Saeed was shown with a bruised and contorted face, a fractured skull, broken nose, and dislocated jaw. The photos of Saeed's corpse were released onto the Internet by his family in June 2010. They went viral and came to symbolize the key grievances and goals of the protestors; the main objective was to end police brutality, terminate Egypt's 30-year "state of emergency," and eliminate social inequalities and the endemic poverty caused by systemic corruption and misconduct by the ruling elite.

After Khaled Saeed's death, a Facebook page entitled *We Are All Khaled Said*[6] was launched by a small group of anonymous activists. The Arab name of the page, *Elshaheeed*, means "a martyr" or "the one who witnesses." The symbolic power of this webpage was evident in its name *We are all Khaled Saeed*, which, we argue, should not be interpreted simply as a solidarity statement. Rather, the symbolic message communicated on the page should be "we all are potential Khaled Saeeds" (martyrs and victims of police brutality and torture). An excerpt from the page's information section describes Saeed as the "the symbol for many Egyptians who dream to see their country free of brutality, torture, and ill treatment."[7] In addition to providing a visual testimony of police brutality, the page provided a platform for interaction, information exchange, and encouragement, all of which are central elements for creating mediated sociality among the users of the sites and visitors (Thompson, 1995). In addition, international humanitarian actors and the global mainstream media contributed to authorizing Saeed's martyr narrative. Human Rights Watch suggested that Saeed's death was "the final straw" for Egyptians (see Note 4). In addition, on 1 June 2010, BBC reported that Saeed's death became a rallying point against police brutality for Egyptians.

The martyrology of Khaled Saeed, the narrative of his violent death, was told repeatedly via different media outlets such as Youtube videos, online documentaries, Facebook, and mainstream media documentaries and movies.[8] Images of Khaled Saeed were circulated and remediated in various ways. Furthermore, martyr images of a "living martyr"—Saeed smiling at the onlooker—was circulated in different media platforms. In addition to circulating his photographs, both tortured and living, Khaled Saeed's image was given artistic interpretations in the form of cartoons, political satire pictures, and artworks. People also printed his photo image on big banners and displayed these images in demonstrations. In certain incidents, his image was shown bruised in postmortem form and in others as a young and vibrant man with a casual hoodie and fresh haircut. As plain but dramatic images, Saeed's martyr pictures had the potential to speak to the Egyptian protesters' minds and hearts—irrespective of their age, gender, social class, education level, or ideology—and enabled the protesters to identify with Saeed's suffering and torture caused by the tyranny.

Mediated martyrdom in a digital age

Khaled Saeed and Mohamed Bouazizi were two ordinary young Muslim men, not *jihadists* or suicide bombers, who became subjects of arbitrary violence by the tyranny. They were humiliated (Bouazizi was harassed by the police who denied to his right to

sell fruit without a license) and tortured (Saeed) by the police, which eventually caused their death. In both cases, the death of these young men was narrativized in the immediate interpretive community as a martyr death. Their deaths came to symbolize profound injustice in society and arbitrariness exercised by the police against the people, unemployment, and deep dissatisfaction with existing regimes. Bouazizi's death had elements of Durkheim's (1951 [1897]) altruistic suicide. Within this framework of thinking, he took his own life as a sacrifice to protest the injustice of a corrupted political system and its violent machinery. On the other hand, Khaled Saeed did not take his own life in a similar manner as the police killed him. Drawing on the vocabulary of Muslim martyrdom, Saeed took a risk and went against unjust rules. He was caught at an Internet café, a symbolic site for a world that challenges the power of state control. Saeed had also used this power to publish material in which he criticized the corruption of the police. The features that characterized these deaths—*altruistic, self-sacrifice*, and *risk-taking against political rulers*—easily appealed to religious and political imagination in certain growing fractions of the Muslim community that were deeply dissatisfied with the existing political order.

It is critical to our analysis to mention that Bouazizi and Saeed were *not* initially proclaimed to be martyrs by Muslim religious authorities but by the public who kept relating the stories of Bouazizi and Saeed in and via the digital media. Ordinary people such as relatives, activists, and other media actors played a key role in claiming these two deaths as martyr deaths. Moreover, the *practices* of digital and visual mediation and related witnessing were of crucial significance in *transforming* these individual deaths into symbolic death events and accord them a status of martyr death of heroic suffering—first in the eyes of the North African countries and their Muslim communities and then beyond (cf. Mitchell, 2005). The images of Bouazizi and Saeed made people in different physical localities *vicarious witnesses* of these Muslim martyr deaths (Ashuri and Pinchevski, 2009). According to Hatina (2014), Bouazizi and Saeed could no longer speak, but their sacrifices were kept alive in the stories by their families, ordinary people, and activists in Tunis and Egypt in and via digital media and the Internet. By copying, repeating, remixing, and "recycling" violent material related to their deaths, Bouazizi and Saeed were given a status of individuals who, through a publicly witnessed death, conveyed a deterrent message of determination, commitment, and non-submission to the enemy (i.e. the ruler and his establishment). In this context, they served as role models worthy of imitation and recruitment agents for future martyrs in the battle against evil rulers and their power. To put it in symbolic language, the martyr narratives of Bouazizi and Saeed were an attempt to ascribe meaning to a confusing and occasionally threatening reality. In this kind of symbolic meaning making, the good became "civic martyrs," and evil was represented by autocrats and oppressive regimes—an interpretation that inspired people to rise against their regimes in North African countries. Nevertheless, digital mediation could not have had such a wide impact had these stories and images not been circulated and remediated among different media (Valaskivi and Sumiala, 2014). The martyrology of Bouazizi and Saeed was disseminated actively not only in and via social media and social networking sites such as Facebook or Wikipedia but also via global mainstream media such as CNN, Al Jazeera, and BBC World. Hence, the multi-sited digital and visual mediation made the communication related to Bouazizi's and Saeed's martyr deaths *ubiquitous*, *mobile, interconnected*, and *responsive*, all typical characteristics of mediating communication in the context of the networked world of the Internet (Lövheim, 2013: 155).

Rethinking the ethics of global solidarity

Torture is a powerful force. In Aristotelian dramatic theory, to witness someone's suffering is to awaken pity or fear: "For pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves."[9] To follow Foster's (1996) insight, the authority of a media witness comes from being a witness to explicit traumatic material such as graphic images or videos of torture. Foster (1996: 124) maintains that this "evacuates and elevates the subject" and "gives it absolute authority, for one cannot challenge the trauma of another."

When discussing the visual aesthetics of suffering in the cases of Bouazizi and Saeed, special emphasis needs to be given to the analysis of the dynamics between the "living" and "tortured" martyr imagery and their implications on creating and maintaining digital solidarities in various contexts. Halverson et al. (2013: 326) underline the significance of the aesthetics of a "living martyr" as a catalyst in creating imaginaries of solidarity in the Muslim community. Simultaneously, another kind of aesthetics of suffering was circulating in the digital media—that of a "tortured" martyr with a bruised face as in the case of Saeed, or a burnt and deeply injured body as in the case of Bouazizi.

We argue that what has been described here as a mediated sociality was, indeed, created around the vicarious witness around the imaginations of suffering of these men, but that there were multiple narrative frames at play due to the global circulation of these imageries. According to Halverson et al. (2013), the images of Bouazizi and Saeed as "living martyrs"—smiling, happy, and powerfully gazing at the onlooker in diverse digital media outlets and platforms—were particularly relevant in the Muslim context. In our concluding remarks, we would like to expand the analysis of visual mediation of Muslim martyrdom beyond the North African and Arab Muslim world in order to better understand the social, ethical, and political dynamics embedded in the *global* circulation of these images (see also, Kraidy 2016).

The suffering of Bouazizi and Saeed began to touch a wider global audience in the "West" through a complex process of digital mediation. This created a social space in which mediated solidarities could be mobilized beyond certain Muslim contexts and interpretive frameworks. Waves of sympathy arose among people of different religious and non-religious backgrounds. In this process of global mediation of martyrdom, Khaled Saeed and Mohamed Bouazizi became part of the wider system of symbols beyond their local religious and political significance. They not only had a particular geocultural significance and symbolism in the Arab and Islamic worlds, but also—inevitably—a more cosmopolitan impact through global media in the so-called global audience. To give one example, in the traditional Christian narrative system, the image of a tortured martyr has had a strong cultural resonance in history and encapsulated powerful spiritual, emotional, and moral aspirations (Mitchell, 2012a). In more secularized narrative contexts, people who were not familiar with North African and Muslim cultures and related martyrologies, nor the Christian cultural and religious heritage (or who had distanced themselves from that), could still sense the human vulnerability particularly in the images of torture and suffering.

Therefore, we may argue that in these multiple frames of interpretation circulating in globalized digital media, the imaginaries of solidarity around Bouazizi and Saeed were not only constructed around the visual manifestation of the martyrs as "one of us"—

giving sacrifice for "us"—but also around suffering of the vulnerable "other," for whom the vicarious witnesses could feel pity and empathize with human vulnerability. Consequently, the circulation of the martyr narratives of Bouazizi and Saeed created *a multitude of re-spatialized simultaneities and mediated socialities* around torture and suffering that crossed not only physical and virtual barriers but also many religious, cultural, and political boundaries.

Finally, we believe that Chouliaraki's (2011, 2015) work on distant suffering may further help us to advance our scholarly thinking when trying to understand the complex social dynamics activated in different religious and other communities when facing mediated martyrdom. Chouliaraki's work encourages us to revisit the idea of digital solidarity in the current condition, in which the historical, cultural, religious, and political gap between the martyr (in the case of this article) and the onlooker becomes greater. Following her work, we may ask how different digital platforms and practices of mediation of Muslim martyrdom succeed or fail in interpreting vulnerable others on the screen (see also, Boltanski, 1999; Silverstone, 2004, 2006).[AQ2] Chouliaraki (2011) suggests three possible positions for solidarity. The first one is a humanitarian position, in which the distance between the suffering individual and the onlooker is diminished in the name of universal pity. Chouliaraki criticizes this position for its lack of historical and cultural perspective. The second position is that of a spectacle, in which the onlooker is gazing at the suffering of the other through the ironic cultural lens of a consumer. This type of solidarity is typically for a global and neo-liberal media market aiming at better audiences and, hence, more profit. Chouliaraki opposes this kind of commodification of suffering and the nature of solidarity embedded in it. Her third position is of *solidarity as agony*, a concept Chouliaraki borrows from Arendt (1990 [1958]). In this type of solidarity, a "proper distance"—a concept first introduced by Silverstone (2004)—is maintained between the onlooker and the suffering human being. The critical element in solidarity as agony is the recognition of the very *asymmetry of power* between the onlooker and the suffering individual—the distant spectator and the Muslim martyr in a given case. Chouliaraki (2011: 364) argues that this is the only way that we may put forward a morally acceptable proposal of global solidarity toward vulnerable others, no matter which religious, political, or cultural background. Thus, when further developing the study of mediated martyrdom and its implications to global solidarity in a digital age, not only do we need a better understanding of the workings of the digital media (the platforms and their communicative dynamics), the shared religious, cultural, and political meanings constituted in this communication (shared narrative frameworks) but also the ethical dynamics activated when thinking about distant suffering. The issue of global solidarity as agony and the related asymmetries of power in mediated global communication of martyrdom definitely deserves more attention as the scholarship of digital media, religion, and culture continues to grasp the complex intersections between translocal and transnational religious and political phenomenon like Muslim martyrdom and its communication in a digital age.

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Notes[AQ3]

1. The Qur'an (2004), 5: 87–92; 21: 51–52.
2. Al Jazeera English (2011).
3. BBC News Africa (2011); CNN (2011).
4. ABC News (2011); BBC News (2010); El Amrani (2010).
5. Almasry (2010).
6. Facebook (2014), Available at: http://www.facebook.com/elshaheeed.co.uk
7. We are all Khaled Said (2015).
8. Wikipedia (2014), Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Khaled_Mohamed_Saeed
9. The Project Gutenberg (2008).

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