Listening as a citizenship practice post-Arab Spring: mediated civic listening as a struggle, duty and joy in Urban Morocco

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Abstract
Where options to speak out and to find recognition are limited, it is tempting to explore citizens’ engagement from an angle of self-expression. With the so-called Arab Spring, narratives about ‘Arabs speaking out’ gained prominence in Western publics, highlighting Arabs’ civic engagement, and also countering long-standing Western images of Arabs as passive and/or violent. In contrast, building on ethnographic research with Moroccan urban women affiliated with the Islamic-oriented Justice and Development Party, this article identifies and discusses listening as a critical media practice. Notably, this article suggests recognising listening as a valuable active citizenship practice next to practices of voice. As a critical part of emerging civic cultures in the Arab world, listening helps revealing understudied links between civic knowledge, listening, civic engagement and empowerment. In this endeavour, this article discusses the interviewees’ mediated listening practices for civic knowledge as a duty, struggle and joy pertaining to authoritarianism, class and gender issues, illustrating how reciprocal listening and knowledge redistribution are used as a civic engagement and empowerment strategy. The article aims to contribute to debates on Arab-mediated civic cultures as well as the concept of listening that has previously been discussed mainly in the context of Western democracies.

Keywords
Arab Spring, citizenship, civic knowledge, listening, media practices, Middle East, self-expression, voice

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Introduction

Throughout the Arab world, new voices and civic participatory cultures are emerging. Narratives on Arab citizens’ engagement in the public sphere shortly before, during and after the Arab Spring have highlighted struggles for democratisation and justice through active participation, meaning embodied or discursive engagement in physical or digital spaces, such as protesting in the streets, holding up posters, spraying graffiti, blogging or exchanging messages in social media (see among many Bayat, 2010; Kraidy, 2016; Matar, 2016; Zayani, 2015). In simplified terms, such forms of engagement can be summarised under the label of ‘speaking out’. Considering the level of restrictions for citizenship participation and socio-political misrecognitions, many Arab citizens have been facing in autocratic and patriarchal regimes, explorations of ‘speaking out’ and active participation have been critical.

This article adds to the growing body of literature on Arab civic participatory cultures by highlighting an aspect of participation that has found little mention so far – listening. Hitherto, the concept of listening has widely been discussed in the context of Western liberal democracies (Bickford, 1996; Crawford, 2009; Dobson, 2014; Dreher, 2009; Lacey, 2013; Macnamara, 2013). Yet, based on my in-depth ethnographic research with Moroccan urban women affiliated with the Islamic-oriented Justice and Development Party, I argue that there is much to be gained from broadening our analytic perspectives to include listening.

To start, this article explores and critically discusses common narratives about media and civic engagement in the contemporary Arab world framed within ‘the politics of voice’, and in a next step, proposes listening as an alternative lens. On this basis and my ethnographic research, I will consider how mediated listening for civic knowledge as a duty, struggle and joy can help grasp understudied links between civic knowledge, listening, civic engagement and empowerment outside established democracies.

Media, self-expression and civic engagement in the Arab world

Recent studies have drawn attention to the changing civic cultures in the Arab world. Published shortly before or after the so-called Arab Spring starting in the early 2010s, they have paid witness to the unfolding multiple, at times creative demonstrations of civic and political agencies throughout the Arab world (see among many Bayat, 2010; Kraidy, 2016; Matar, 2016; Zayani, 2015). Often residing outside established autocratic regimes, these emerging political cultures and agencies have benefitted from changes within the Arab (trans)national mediated public spheres and the increased use of new media. As Mohamed Zayani (2016) has pointed out,

Recent developments – better access to communication platforms, more proficiency in using information and communication technologies, wide adoption of 2.0 web applications, high internet penetration rates, noticeable growth in social media usage, ubiquitous use of mobile technology, faster pace and cheaper cost for transferring information – have transformed how information is being produced and consumed, altering user habits, shaping citizen experiences, introducing new societal dynamics, and reshaping power configurations. (p. 30)
Taking such altering media and societal dynamics into account, above-mentioned studies have identified public participation as a central mode of citizenship, challenging long-standing citizenship models in the region that had been built on and encourage obedience or allegiance, with varying degrees of state-based rights (Hammoudi, 1997; Wedeen, 2008). In simplified terms, these various observed forms of engagement can be summarised under the label of ‘speaking out’.

This focus on the active nature of Arab citizens’ civic engagement can be justified by the historically limited options for meaningful participation and voice in Arab public spheres. As Zayani (2016) wrote, the uprisings that started in 2010 and affected most countries in the region took place within an authoritarian context marked by single party rule, absence of free elections, lack of meaningful citizenship participation, disregard for the rule of law, the absence of shared governance and the pervasiveness of corruption and nepotism. (pp. 30–31)

Similar narratives on public participation and self-expression are to be found in scholarship on women’s roles in evolving Arab (mediated) civic cultures. In the relatively early days of scholarship at the intersection of Arab media and women’s studies, Loubna Skalli (2006) highlighted that ‘an increasing number of women are producing alternative discourses and images about womanhood, citizenship, and political participation in their societies’ (p. 36). Studies in this field of research have examined women’s roles in new mediated spaces and the critical role of media platforms in facilitating voice. They provided valuable insights into the achievements Arab women have made so far in entering autocratic, elitist and/or male-dominated public spheres, in tackling patriarchy and debating women’s concerns, and engaging in revolutionary movements and fostering wider socio-political change (Khamis, 2010; Otterman, 2007; Radsch and Khamis, 2013; Sakr, 2004; Skalli, 2006; Thorsen and Sreedharan, 2019).

At the intersection of Arab media and women’s studies, frameworks around public participation and speaking out are particularly plausible. Many women in the region have been facing some sort of double jeopardy, meaning women’s double restrictions in relation to gender-specific legal discriminations that add to general limited civic and political rights (Kandiyoti, 2000: xiv).

Shining a spotlight on Arabs’ active civic participation has also been critical to challenge Western stereotypes that only gradually seem to diminish with the uprisings. Indeed, Western mainstream public discourses have long centred upon the notion of Arabs and Muslims as the violent ‘Other’ and Arab women as passive and obedient (Said, 1978; also see Rane et al., 2014). Yet, with the so-called Arab Spring, not only academia but also Western media increasingly render visible Arab women’s and men’s active public engagement. In particular, Anglophone newspapers intensified their dedications to Arab people’s struggles for greater justice and participation, fostering the narrative that Arabs now ‘find their voice’ through ‘speaking up’.1 While it is clearly a positive development that mediated publics acknowledge Arab citizens’ agency, what needs to be noted is the common discursive binary construction of ‘silence and oppression’ versus ‘speaking and voice’.
Similarly, also in nuanced academic studies, it is often active participation, namely, speaking, that is identified as the centre point for voice, agency and socio-political change. The relation between speaking and voice is rarely directly explored but rather envisioned as a consequence of entanglements between protest activism, mobilisation and counter narratives challenging dominant ways of being and performing. Exploring storytelling practices in the context of the Syrian uprisings, Matar (2016), for instance, has suggested that, quoting Charles Tripp, emerging alternative narrative practices may contribute to a ‘steady erosion that can take place as established authorities find themselves outflanked, superseded, mocked and derided’ (Tripp, 2012: 261 cited in Matar, 2016: 90). Analysing such emerging narratives and the ways in which they are presented, performed, exchanged and contested is critical considering the double concern raised above, namely, Arab citizens’ struggles for meaningful civic participation in widely autocratic and patriarchal societies as well as Western stereotypes about Arabs. And while variants of speaking such as embodied protesting or (re)telling counter narratives can be, and have been, a fruitful avenue for exploring voice and socio-political change in the Arab world, focusing predominantly on correlations between speaking and voice limits ways of imagining participation and voice beyond speaking.

A variant of public participation that has attracted considerably less attention is listening. Nevertheless, in my research with Moroccan women affiliated with the Justice and Development Party, listening was a key component in these women’s narratives on their media practices, as a struggle, duty and joy. Although widely understood as passive, listening is a critical part of responsible civic engagement (Lacey, 2013), and key for voice that matters (Couldry, 2010). As this article further illustrates, listening is neither passive nor a ‘luxury’ issue for established Western democracies where freedom of speech, a precondition for voice, has been widely realised. On the contrary, based on my findings, this article highlights the importance of listening independent of political contexts but also particularly in non-democratic states, and contributes to our understanding of understudied links between civic knowledge, listening and engagement.

**Voice and listening**

In this article, I propose an exploration of listening practices to draw attention to the ways mediated listening can function as a citizenship practice and potentially foster wider civic engagement. Notably, my take on listening here moves beyond ‘the politics of voice’ which has resonated with scholarship and Western publics in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings.

Voice as a concept, I recall, is interested in how practices of speaking out can foster socio-political change. As has been rightly noted, particularly in environments such as the Arab world where freedom of expression and meaningful participation are limited or denied, questions of agency and processes of public self-expression are particularly critical (Couldry, 2010: 1). This notwithstanding, it has been convincingly argued by scholars such as Nick Couldry (2010) that ultimately for voice to be meaningful some sort of recognition is necessary. Critically, then, Couldry conceptualised voice also as a value, a moral compass acknowledging that meaningful public participation necessitates expressing and listening.
Nevertheless, listening often remains conceptualised as a precondition for voice. The focus is placed on the passive form of the verb, the right to ‘be listened to’, rather than the active form, ‘listening’. Put differently, listening is predominantly analysed as part of the dialectic relationship between speaking and listening rather than as an active citizenship practice in its own right. This has been well summarised by Kate Lacey (2013):

We normally think about agency in the public sphere as speaking up, or as finding a voice; in other words, to be listened to, rather than to listen. [...] and yet what really goes unsaid is that speech requires a listener. What is actually at stake here is [...] the freedom to be heard. But this formulation still put the speaker centre stage; it is still formulated as the politics of voice. The presence of a listening public is simply assumed, and no special freedoms or protections are afforded to the act of listening. (p. 167)

The real value of listening can only be apprehended when it is constructed not only as the right to be listened to but as an act in itself worth studying, when it is constructed not merely as ‘just a staging post in becoming an informed citizen’ (Lacey, 2013: 16) but a vital part of an active, engaged public sphere, where listening is both a right and a duty.

So far, scholarly narratives on listening mainly centred on listening as an ethical duty. Writing in the context of multicultural Australia, Tanja Dreher (2009) in particular has pleaded for an analytical and ethical shift from the ‘right to be listened to’ to an ‘obligation to listen’, to reveal and challenge ‘the conventions, institutions and privileges which shape who and what can be heard’ (p. 447). Her valuable concept of ‘listening across difference’ puts issues of privilege centre-stage, discussing how awareness and the ‘response-ability’ of the privileged can be increased. Kate Lacey (2013: 8), in contrast, understands the obligation to listen in broader terms of citizenship. According to her, ‘listening in’ to specific media texts and ‘listening out’, defined as an ‘attentive and anticipatory communicative disposition’, is a moral citizenship duty for all citizens. It means listening in and out to what is happening in the public; to what is being argued, demanded and done; and to what is neglected, criticised and unwelcome.

In the context of this research, listening as a duty played a critical role, both in terms of privilege and wider meaningful citizenship participation. Concerning the Arab world, it may be compelling to investigate ‘listening across difference’ in regard to sectarian or Islamist/secular dividing lines, and the role of institutions and individuals in upholding difference or nurturing understanding and plurality. In this research, however, perhaps as a result of an era that has been considered ‘post-ideological’ (Louër, 2011; Zeghal, 2011), narratives on ‘listening across difference’ rather centred upon class privilege. The female interviewees in this research were widely middle class with an upper social mobility background. They repeatedly engaged in narratives about their duty to assemble and redistribute civic knowledge to fellow citizens through mediated listening practices – and the struggles to do so in a widely authoritarian state.

Here, in non-democratic contexts where civic listening as a duty is unwanted, the centrality of listening not only as a duty but a right and, indeed, struggle becomes clear. In such contexts, ‘the freedom of listening that encompasses both a responsibility and a right to listen’ (Lacey, 2013: 9) is restricted. Genuine listening to other voices and for further critical civic information is inhibited through censorship, propaganda and other
forms of disinformation. Yet, meaningful civic participation really demands a certain degree of awareness and knowledge. But where listening as a right is restricted, assembling valuable civic knowledge, for instance, through media reception, becomes a major task. As Dahlgren (2009) has argued,

\[\text{civic agency involves stepping into the public sphere, making sense of media representations of relevant developments, and discussing current events with others; from that other actions may be taken. In all of these contexts, some degree of knowledge is required. One cannot act successfully as a citizen in the absence of knowledge . . . (p. 76)}\]

Interestingly, assembling civic knowledge through mediated listening was not only a struggle and duty but also a joy for the female interviewees. Scholars such as Susan Bickford (1996) have long drawn attention to gendered dimensions of voice in that women are often less likely to be heard than men. The women I interviewed and spent time with during fieldwork, however, highlighted the joy that consuming civic information brought them considering Morocco’s low education levels that have particularly affected women. Similarly, they also seemed to get joy and confidence from engaging in dialogue with fellow citizens and ‘reciprocal listening’.

Indeed, these women used media not only to listen for civic knowledge but also to redistribute it through mediated practices of what Kate Crawford (2013) has called ‘reciprocal listening’. In the context of some politicians’ efforts to engage with citizens on social media platforms, Crawford (2009) has defined ‘reciprocal listening’ as ‘hearing and responding to comments and direct messages’ (p. 530). Crawford has suggested that politicians’ online presence and reciprocal listening is a way to hold powerful politicians’ accountable. The women I encountered, however, widely framed their online reciprocal listening practices in terms of knowledge transmission and civic empowerment.

Notably, then, this research suggests exploring mediated listening practices as a critical part of emerging civic cultures in the Arab world that can help reveal understudied links between civic knowledge, mediated listening, civic engagement and empowerment. Here, listening is not marginalised as a passive, necessary precondition for voice but identified as a central and valuable active citizenship practice that is worth exploring in greater detail next to practices of ‘speaking out’. In this endeavour, I will discuss the interviewees’ mediated listening practices for civic knowledge as a duty, struggle and joy pertaining to authoritarianism, class and gender issues, illustrating in a next step how reciprocal listening and knowledge redistribution are used as civic engagement strategy.

**Methodology and country background**

The data used in this article were gathered as part of a wider project that examined narratives on media practices and representations of women affiliated with the Islamic but also democracy-oriented Justice and Development Party in Morocco. This was of interest for two reasons. First, in Morocco as elsewhere in the Arab world, women and particularly Islamic-oriented women have long been widely absent and denied a voice in the public (Abdellatif and Ottaway, 2007; El Haitami, 2016). Second, various non-elitist
democratic forces in Morocco have long struggled for socio-political change. Morocco, the westernmost Arab country is a parliamentary constitutional monarchy that has remained widely authoritarian despite efforts to democratise. During the Arab Spring, when the Moroccan 20 February Movement (Fernández Molina, 2011) called for protests, the monarchy managed to steal the protestors’ thunder by offering a more democratic constitution and early general elections. Following the elections, the long-marginalised Justice and Development Party entered government for the first time, yet the ‘Makhzen’, Morocco’s deep state, has de-facto continued to rule the country (Werenfels and Saliba, 2017) and the so-called ‘mediatic Makhzen’, meaning ‘a media elite linked to the palace by chains of loyalty’ (El Issawi, 2016: 23), has remained a powerful player in the media. With this in mind, the aim of this project was to explore what it means for these women to be in the public post-Arab Spring, what their socio-political aspirations and struggles are and what role media play for public voice and (mis)recognition.

In 2015 and 2016, I conducted 9 months of fieldwork in Moroccan cities and towns between the capital Rabat and Casablanca. I did semi-structured qualitative interviews with 22 women affiliated with the Justice and Development Party, and gathered additional data through participant observation. I initiated contact through official party channels, personal contacts and snowballing. I interviewed a wide range of grown-up women, including new as well as long-standing, locally active as well as elite party members and supporters. As is typical for members and supporters of the Party, these women were from the middle classes, with many having an upward social mobility background. In most cases, I conducted two semi-structured interviews with each of the participants, each interview lasting between 60 and 150 minutes. Questions centred on the women’s socio-political aspirations; public daily lives and practices; struggles with systems of power including media, politics and patriarchy; and how they use and reflect on media.

The data were collected and analysed during multiple coding processes through a narrative analysis, which was expedient regarding that ‘narrative enquiry is a way of understanding human experience through stories’ (Kim, 2016: 190) which can make the meaning explicit that is embedded in stories. While one of my initial concerns had been to explore what role media play for these women’s (mis)recognition in the public, a major narrative pattern emerging from the analysis centred upon listening.

While this small sample of women certainly cannot claim to be representative of Arab women, perhaps not even of Moroccan Islamic-oriented women affiliated with the Justice and Development Party, it allows nevertheless to explore listening as a critical citizenship practice in Morocco and beyond.

**Mediated civic listening as struggle, duty and joy**

For the women I encountered, mediated civic listening was a struggle, duty and joy. This needs to be regarded in Morocco’s specific socio-political environments, past and present. Here, I focus on the three interwoven aspects of authoritarianism, class and gender.
Mirroring the conditions in wide parts of the Arab world, Morocco has struggled with an authoritative regime and low scales of socio-economic development. Speaking about their main political concerns, the women repeatedly stressed democratisation and socio-economic development. As one member of parliament, Hafsa, summarised,

My real struggle is democracy. Do we really have a democratic political system with a constitution, a state under the rule of law, a state without corruption, with an equitable distribution of wealth. […] There is a democratic process, there has been a big evolution because we modified our constitution in 2011, there was the Arab Spring which was really favourable for Morocco. [But unfortunately] we still have this marriage going on between power and wealth and politics.

In authoritarian contexts like Morocco’s, citizens’ freedom to participate in the public sphere including the freedom to listen in and out for civic knowledge has been constrained. Scholarship on development communication has long stressed the important role of free and independent media for civic education, political awareness and democratisation. As Fatema-Zahra, a locally active woman I interviewed pondered, ‘I would like to see our country giving a greater chance to democracy. […] I think this relates to education. If people are better educated, this will increase the levels of participation in elections, and democracy will be strengthened’. Media can provide a system of checks and balances, hold people in positions of responsibility accountable, make governments more responsible and stimulate debate (Zaid, 2009: 6–7). In the post-colonial Arab world, however, authoritarian regimes have commonly used mass media for entertainment or as a propaganda tool rather than for public services (Ayish, 2003). In Morocco, the media benefitted from the political opening during the early years of reign under King Mohammed VI who ascended to the throne in 1999 and initiated The National Initiative for Human Development (NIHD) in 2005. Yet, Morocco’s most important medium, public TV, widely remains elitist and undemocratic, ‘narrowing down the possibilities of participation for the underprivileged and the poor segments of Moroccan society’, as one of the leading scholars on Moroccan media, Bouziane Zaid (2009: 212–213), concluded a decade ago. Overall, little has changed since then. While the Arab Spring and (new) media have been heralded to bring about change, political interference and surveillance continues (El Issawi, 2016), and mistrust towards media remains as in other parts of the Arab world (Moreno-Almeida and Banaji, 2019).

While in their study on young Arabs and their online participation, Moreno-Almeida and Banaji (2019) found that their interviewees ‘rarely mentioned [the Arab Spring] as a key moment that had an unparalleled effect on attitudes towards old media or new media’ (p. 1137), several women I encountered during fieldwork expressed notable disappointment about media in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings. During and following the 2011 protests and constitutional amendments in Morocco, many participants told me that they had felt there was a short time window when new online outlets such as Lakom (El Issawi, 2016) as well as debates and discussions in social media, emboldened by the protests, had provided new impetus. But their hopes that these developments may spark
greater change in old and new media remained widely unfulfilled. Indeed, Morocco’s ‘media structure [has remained] an uneven playing field with the state having the upper hand’ (Zaid, 2017: 343). Disappointment and frustration were particularly visible in the women’s perceptions of Moroccan printed newspapers and public TV. Many frequently complained about the lack of opportunities for civic listening, meaning a lack of space for ‘ordinary’ citizens’ everyday social, political and other educational concerns. According to Latifa,

In our society, I do not want to say that [media] are absent but they are totally on the wrong track. [. . .] The role of mass media is [. . .] to educate them, provide some knowledge and to accompany [the changes following the Arab Spring]. What happens here [in the media] is everything but our society, our culture.

She explained that in 2011, the Moroccan people had made a choice when adopting the new constitution: a choice pro-monarchy but also for reform and greater democracy, and for what she calls a ‘modern Islam’. Frustrated, with a puzzled look on her face, she concluded that there has been a lack of strategic vision and misleading communication ‘which is why this country has remained in development mode for decades and decades’. Khadija agreed, telling me that ‘there is no quality [on Moroccan channels] compared to [the French] TV5, Euronews and other channels that have a history in this domain’. Many expressed particular concern that TV neglects current affairs, sometimes openly assuming undemocratic motivations. Salma, a locally active party member, declared that ‘the producers just do not choose the big issues that answer the questions of the viewers’. In short, mediated civic listening for civic knowledge was a daily struggle.

Listening as a duty

And yet, the women were willing to take on the at times complicated task of mediated listening as they considered it their civic duty. Considering that since independence in 1956, Moroccan governments have indicated a preference for technocrats over politicians fostering political competition (Maghraoui, 2012; Masbah, 2014), the fact that these women repeatedly showed genuine interest in politics, understanding listening to be a civic duty, is truly noteworthy.

The women I encountered frequently used media – mass and social, old and new, national and international media – to enhance their civic knowledge, understood in broad terms as knowledge on current events, society, laws, concrete skills and moral knowledge (Levine, 2012). As has been argued, media play a critical role in ‘transmitting [such] information to the citizens, values related to responsible civic engagement and democratic citizenship’ (Baluta, 2013: 245). Listening out, as a way to ‘remain up to date’ and to understand ‘what is going on’, as many phrased it, was critical to all women I interviewed and spent time with during fieldwork. Notably, some even used the opportunity to check the news on their latest-generation smartphones during short breaks in our interviews when I was hastily scribbling down notes. They regularly read and/or watched the news, political debate and other educational TV shows, and many stressed the constant effort demanded in consuming news and reports from various, mostly digital
outlets to broaden their understanding of public events and discourses, and to keep track with institutional norms and people’s way of thinking in a rapidly changing society. Exemplified in the words of businesswoman and locally active politician Aicha, ‘There is not one website I consult, I consult all sites’. As Aicha explained further,

I follow media, websites, internet, newspapers, Facebook, Twitter, all of that. [. . . And in the evening, when my husband and me are] back home we automatically switch on the TV to see what happened. But we also listen to the radio to see what happened, how society changes. You need to hear an opinion from every component [in society], to remain up to date with fellow citizens. [own emphasis]

In addition, listening in, meaning listening to specific media texts (Lacey, 2013), allowed these women to deepen their knowledge on specific socio-political issues and events, such as Morocco’s 2017 re-inclusion into the African Union. In several interviews, a young local party member, Hanane, mentioned the Moroccan TV discussion show *Mubashara Ma’akum*, specifying during one interview that she watched an episode of the show following Morocco’s re-inclusion into the African Union. For her, as a politician, it was critical to learn about potential implications of this event for Morocco by listening to invited specialists who shared their knowledge and opinions on the issue.

Many women also emphasised the stressful nature of what they considered their duty to remain up to date. Latifa, for instance, a woman with a high-ranking position in her local city council, dreamingly revealed how much she would like to have more time ‘to go out, to the beach, walking, be with my children’. But for the greater purpose of the country, she was willing to sacrifice time to watch and read the news: ‘[It] takes time. Maybe an hour, an hour and half every day. I have to say I sleep 4 to 5 hours a night. It’s not enough. But you have to assume’. Her sense of responsibility kept her going on.

**Listening as a joy**

But for many, it seemed, civic listening was not only a duty. It was often highly noticeable during interviews that mediated civic listening seemed to bring them joy and self-confidence. Many women were visibly excited when they spoke about their favourite TV programmes or news outlets, and proudly showed me newsy apps on their smartphones. As Khadija, a locally active woman and a natural scientist by education, told me,

As a female politician, it is wise to know what is going on, the public opinion. [. . . and] I love getting to know peoples, cultures, and the history of peoples. Documentary films that [show] the course of history. It is so interesting to see how things develop. The past can inspire your present, your future.

This is remarkable in view of the fact that in Morocco, similar to other parts of the Arab world, citizenship has long been male-centric. While citizenship participation has been restricted for both men and women in Morocco’s authoritarian regime, women in particular have struggled to find acceptance as full-fledged citizens due to continued traditional citizenship understandings. As has been argued by Touaf (2017), Morocco’s
traditional public sphere has been ‘the market place where men conduct business’ (p. 127), and until now the idea that ‘politics is conceived of as men’s business’ is still widely present. During interviews, several women expressed concern that few Moroccan women take a genuine interest in politics. As Hanane, a student and elected member of her local city council said, ‘We need to push women to understand politics. Women do all sort of things. But politics, not really’. In contrast, listening out to sharpen their own political views and arguments, and to improve their skills in defending their own visions for the country, was a veritable joy for many women I encountered. As one interviewee stated passionately, smiling, ‘I also like watching the others [people with other political affiliations; on TV]. It’s interesting to understand how they think. [. . .] Then I can criticise them better, my ideas become clearer’. Listening, for them, was a critical practice to flourish in their roles as citizens and politicians.

While all these women were well educated, enabling them to meaningfully participate in the public, it is clear that their joy and duty of listening was at least partly stemming from knowing that many fellow Moroccan citizens, and in particularly women, suffer from very low education levels. Several women from different generations I interviewed stressed that their mothers or grandmothers had been illiterate, highlighting the significance they attach to formal education and continuous access to civic information through media. As Hafsa, a member of parliament probably in her forties, narrated,

Mummy did not have the opportunity to go to school because she [grew up] in a small village [. . .] This is my real struggle, not to reproduce the situation that my mother and grandmother went through and that other young girls are going through in Morocco right now.

The fact that for these women, civic listening was a struggle, duty and joy, must be seen in this context. To them, engaging in civic listening was a privilege, knowing that they have the educational resources to do so meaningfully; it was a struggle in light of Morocco’s widely undemocratic public sphere; and it was a duty, considering that other Moroccans and especially women struggle with assembling valuable civic knowledge needed for meaningful public participation due to low education levels and authoritarianism.

The women’s engagement in listening to fellow citizens, then, needs to be understood against exactly this backdrop. Reciprocal listening served them as a critical basis and tool to civically engage and empower the wider public.

**Reciprocal listening as engagement strategy**

As Crawford (2009) argued, ‘social media platforms give politicians access to millions of users and offer the capacity to build a sense of camaraderie and connection with a wide constituency’ (p. 530). Particularly high-ranking members of the Party I interviewed expressed the usefulness of social media for reaching out and listening to citizens. Here, I follow Crawford’s (2009: 530) suggestion to call this listening practice ‘reciprocal listening’, meaning the ‘hearing and responding to comments and direct messages’ from politicians’ followers on social media platforms.
Listening out for citizens’ hopes, worries and needs was a crucial part of these women’s everyday lives, both on the ground (as I observed during fieldwork) and online. Hafsa, for instance, explained to me that she enjoyed sharing personal stories and reflections as well as comments about political events and issues on Facebook. Her posts were often written in the Moroccan Arabic dialect Darija which is commonly used in everyday conversations in Morocco but rare in politics where the formal Standard Arabic dominates. Mentioning the use of Darija stresses the importance she attached to her posts being easily accessible for wider parts of Moroccan society. What is critical here is that her narration about such posts were not framed in terms of self-expression but listening out for citizens’ comments and reactions: ‘With the commentaries, you can get to know what young people, others think, what their criticisms are, their ideas. I like to know what is happening outside’. Asked whether she reads everything directed at her, she emphasised forcefully, ‘Of course! All commentaries! I try to follow what they write to me on Messenger and WhatsApp as much as possible’.

The emphasis on reciprocal listening is noteworthy in the context of Morocco, where, as mentioned earlier, many high-ranking politicians have been technocrat rather than politically inclined (Maghraoui, 2012; Masbah, 2014). Expressing genuine interest in a dialogue with citizens and trying to engage the latter has been uncommon, as discussed by young member of parliament Fatema, ‘All this is still a bit new. Real politicians who are engaged in real politics, those who explain and influence other people’. Indeed, in Morocco where the King and his entourage, the Makhzen, have remained the central political player and allegiance a central model of citizenship (Hammoudi, 1997), trust in institutions and political engagement have been low.

Aiming to challenge the status quo, listening out for concrete issues citizens face – rather than merely concentrating on self-expression – was a common narrative. As Souad, another member of parliament elaborated,

The relationship with the citizens is very important to me. [. . .] Facebook, Messenger never stop. I always receive complaints regarding the legal system or other issues. For me, it is also a means to listen to the problems and needs of the citizens and communicate with them. It’s not just ‘I express myself’ but also a window to hear the expectations of the citizens. It goes both ways.

If one wanted to criticise my suggestion to consider mediated listening as a critical civic practice in the Arab world, one may argue that particularly high-ranking politicians do not have to use social media channels to speak out considering their position; in contrast to many others, they can afford to listen. However, it is clear that in Morocco’s widely authoritative political system, being a member of parliament or high-ranking party member of a governing party does not necessarily come with wide-ranging decision-making power (Maghraoui, 2019). This certainly holds true with politicians of the Justice and Development Party like the interviewees. The regime has repeatedly aimed to limit the party’s influence (Werenfels and Saliba, 2017), being aware of the latter’s reputation as a grassroots party close to the ‘common’ people and its potential power to mobilise (Masbah, 2014).
The women’s efforts to engage in reciprocal listening needs to be regarded in this light. While Crawford (2009) – in the context of Western democracies – suggested that reciprocal listening can be a way to hold politicians accountable, these women were simply not powerful enough to be held fully accountable for Morocco’s politics and policies. Notably, the women saw themselves in an ‘in-between’ position: neither powerful enough to initiate change top-down nor completely powerless considering their education, political awareness and socio-political standing in society. Using their in-between status, then, many women I interviewed used Facebook as a tool for stipulating desired socio-political change. Listening to fellow citizens’ concerns through narrative exchange on Facebook was a key strategy to spur greater civic and political awareness and, ultimately, engagement. In short, listening served as an invitation for fellow citizens to enter into dialogue and thus become empowered active citizens.

Back then new member of parliament, Sakina, who commonly stressed her lower-class background and the importance to remain close to ‘the people’, recounted a story which exemplifies this purpose of listening, namely, a story on the opening of a new local party centre where citizens are welcomed on a regular basis. Sakina told me,

> We wanted to open a centre [of the Party] in my district, to have meetings with the local population. In this district, there are many people with social difficulties. So we were thinking of opening an office there so we can welcome people, listen to them and try to solve their problems. [. . .] and also to have some activities to encourage people to participate in politics, to know the Party, our programme. [. . .] So we had this little reception with biscuits and tea, to say to the people we are here, we opened that office for you. I took some pictures and shared them [on Facebook]. There were quite a few commentaries and ‘likes’, I think more than 100 or 200. [. . .] So it’s always good to share with others what you do and see what they think. To understand whether you cater to what they are expecting or not.

Here, I suggest that the significance of the women’s various civic listening practices becomes visible. Sakina’s statement illustrates a combination of offline and online pathways to foster civic and political awareness and participation through reciprocal listening. It seems that the interviewees’ education and civic knowledge, likely to be partly acquired through mediated civic listening, as described earlier, is redistributed to fellow less educated and politically aware citizens.

Importantly, then, the interviewees’ self-expression on social media needs to be seen in the context of listening beyond the ‘politics of voice’ (Lacey, 2013). For these women, change is not imagined to be stimulated through speaking and being listened to but through constant, active civic listening. Put differently, the aim of reciprocal listening here is to transmit and redistribute civic knowledge to fellow citizens and thereby spur awareness and participation. Provoking change, it is imagined, means to boost political leverage power through increasing the critical mass of engaged and empowered citizens.

While these women did not narrate their reciprocal listening activities in gendered terms, meaning women’s empowerment, gender played a critical role nevertheless. Simply put, I sensed personal satisfaction from their engagement in reciprocal listening. The women seemed to gain confidence and acknowledgement from other citizens.
reaching out to them and from being recognised as someone who matters in Morocco’s hierarchical and male-dominated public sphere.

**Conclusion**

Situated within the two growing bodies of literature on listening and Arab (mediated) civic participatory cultures, this article highlighted that mediated civic listening is a critical and active citizenship practice that deserves greater attention next to practices of ‘speaking out’ against widely unjust and corrupt authoritarian regimes.

Building on, extending and challenging previous conceptualisations of listening mainly derived from Western democratic epistemologies, I have proposed three analytical perspectives: mediated civic listening as a struggle, duty and joy. All these listening patterns need to be seen as rooted in time and space. These patterns emerged within the context and boundaries of today’s urban middle-class Morocco, where the continued power of a widely undemocratic regime impedes easy mediated listening for civic knowledge, and where authoritarian and patriarchal dominance in the public sphere as well as low levels of education – which has particularly affected women, makes listening not only a struggle but equally a joy and privilege and in turn also a duty for the privileged.

Against the backdrop that previous studies framed listening mainly as a civic duty in the context of Western liberal democracies (Dreher, 2009; Lacey, 2013), further studies might investigate whether the additional perspectives that this article has suggested – listening as a struggle and joy, are perhaps distinct features of authoritarian settings where listening for civic knowledge is often hampered and unwanted. It also remains to be seen whether listening as a joy is particularly meaningful for understanding women’s public participation in societies where women have only recently been recognised as citizens in the public sphere.

In any case, it is clear that listening patterns are situated and thus worth comparing and contrasting for a greater understanding of listening as an active civic practice. A further pattern that my analysis has shown is reciprocal listening. Notably, in this specific research context, here meaning the interviewees’ fluid position between socio-political power and powerlessness, the approach to reciprocal listening did not centre upon the possibility of political accountability as previously suggested in a democratic context (Crawford, 2009) but rather knowledge redistribution.

Critically, in all the listening patterns analysed in this article, civic knowledge transpired as a key variable for positive socio-political change. Here, change is not imagined and envisioned through practices of embodied as well as discursive protest (cf. Bayat, 2010; Kraidy, 2016; Matar, 2016; Zayani, 2015) but through repeated practices of active civic listening and knowledge redistribution. In other words, the article suggests that accumulating and transmitting civic knowledge to fellow, potentially less educated citizens through reciprocal listening can serve as a basis and tool for increasing civic awareness and engagement, and thus political leverage power. Surely, practices of listening, and the hopes and intentions these may carry, vary widely across the Arab world considering the very different circumstances countries in the region find themselves in a decade after the uprisings. Yet, by reflecting on the critical links between civic knowledge,
listening, civic engagement and empowerment, it is evident that a study of emerging Arab civic cultures benefits from considering practices of mediated listening beyond ‘the politics of voice’.

Exploring these links between knowledge, listening and civic empowerment may further be worthwhile in various non-democratic contexts outside the Arab world. The question is whether, more generally, reciprocal listening for knowledge redistribution and civic empowerment constitute variants of public participation that are particularly salient in authoritarian settings considering that highly visible acts of speaking out might lead to repression rather than voice and recognition, as could amply be observed following the so-called Arab Spring, for instance.

To conclude, it needs to be stressed that this study, tentative and clearly limited in scope, has engaged with narratives on listening practices rather than the actual practices themselves. Further investigation should explore and discuss how actual practices of listening manifest themselves and matter in various temporal, cultural and socio-political settings across and beyond the Arab world.

Acknowledgements
I thank Prof Stephen Coleman, Prof David Hesmondhalgh as well as Gwendolyn Gilliéron for their valuable comments on previous drafts; the two anonymous reviewers for taking the time to review the article; and especially Dr Dina Matar for her continuous support throughout the research project this article is part of.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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Notes
1. See, for example, articles in The Times (https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/voices-of-the-arab-spring-sc2xn5rvjb), The New York Times (https://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/30/world/middleeast/30arab.html; https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/interactive/2011/03/20/world/middleeast/middle-east-voices.html#) and from the British Council (https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/insight-articles/young-arab-voices) (all accessed 20 April 2018).
2. All participant names are pseudonyms.
3. Despite a significant decrease in the last decades, illiteracy rates have remained high in Morocco, particularly for women. Recent statistics from UNESCO suggest that more than 35% of women that are 15 years or older are illiterate. See http://uis.unesco.org/country/MA (accessed 19 October 2019).

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