"Our Website Was Revolutionary" Virtual Spaces of Representation and Resistance

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Abstract

The growth of Internet usage by spatially and/or ideologically marginalized groups has become a proven avenue for representation, cross-border connections, and political mobilization. Groups on the social and/or political margins use cyberspace to counter hegemonic or stereotypical understanding of their particular cause through websites and electronic communication. Marginalized groups often seek media attention to raise their political voice beyond the boundaries of their states/nations. However, media attention can both compliment and at times complicate political representations.

This paper examines the use of Internet and email technology by the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), and the intersecting and complicated forms of representation associated with RAWA's

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website, the international support RAWA draws, and the media attention it receives. Internet and email technologies have had a tremendous impact on RAWA's members and supporters, and on their ability to connect to international supporters both virtually and in physical spaces. RAWA's website provides a virtual and safe public space for presenting the association's political views and soliciting financial support. The association also uses the Internet to represent and define geographic space. In addition, the erratic international media coverage and attention paid to RAWA reinforces the tenuous connection to and temporal shifts of international sympathy and monetary support. I examine three aspects related to RAWA's representation and resistance tactics through Internet technology: relieving embodied experiences of isolation; generating funds from international donors and within the global market place; and media (and mediated) appropriations and challenges.

Internet Technology and Spatially Marginalized Groups

From the mid-1990s Internet use has grown at all levels of the global economic and political power hierarchies. Despite overwhelming concerns from both ends of the political spectrum cyberspace is neither a utopian ideal of unrestricted liberal communication nor one dominated by totalitarian forces (Resnick, 1998). The growth and expansion of the Internet also coincides with the expansion of markets and consumption patterns. For the purposes of this paper, however, I focus on the use of the Internet as an agent of political resistance with the potential to alter power balances (Routledge, 1998).

Internet, email, and communication technologies are proven catalysts for transnational organizing and resistance for socially, politically, and economically marginalized and oppressed ideas and groups (Capling and Nossal, 2001; Carty, 2002; Iseke-Barnes, 2002; McDonald 2002; Routledge 2000; Staudt 2002). Conversely, mechanization and other forms of "modern" technologies have facilitated the economic and political subordination of the world's poor and the "digital divide" remains among Internet users due to issues of location and accessibility. However, access to the Internet is growing among marginalized and/or oppressed groups, who utilize it to organize across the spatial restrictions of their marginality (see Keck and Sikkink 1998). Cyberspace provides a fast and relatively inexpensive medium to network and rapidly disseminate information, raise funds, and/or recruit new members (Riemer, 2003). The use of cyberspace for subversive or counter-power structure resistance is also contingent on the fluidity and openness of this virtual space (Resnick, 1998). The lack of control over this space allows groups from the physical margins of political space to represent their position without direct inputs, intrusion, or manipulation.

Political websites shape representations of experiences and the constructions of place and identity. Cyberspace is neither completely separate from physical social spaces nor accurately representative of these spaces. Rather, it is contextually located through the lens of a particular groups' representation of place, politics and identity (Starrs, 1997; Jackson, 1997). The Internet and other communication technologies also connect otherwise isolated groups, such as women's rights advocates, and thereby increase cross-border connections among feminist activists (Fountain, 2000; Liebowitz, 2002; Light, 1995; Sampaio, 2004; Scott, 2001). In addition, indigenous groups utilize the web for resistance education and what Iseke-Barnes (2002: 174) refers to as "writing back" against colonial ideologies and current stereotypes. Undoubtedly, websites provide both a forum for the spatially and ideologically excluded to represent place and politics essentially unabated by the filters of government, media or other social and political competitors. This virtual freedom of representation is, of course, contingent on the lack of control by powerful institutions and/or governments (Resnick, 1998).

Governments are primary actors in curtailing the boundaries of acceptable activities and identities in physical public space, but may have limited (if any) control over cyberspace. Thus, cyberspace provides open flows of communication and representation for subversive or counter-political groups. However, public (physical) space remains an important aspect of political representation, resistance and action – for example, political groups cannot only operate solely through a virtual medium (D'Arcus, 2006). Public spaces that are mediated and or controlled by state actors also exemplify the spatial processes of marginalizing the "unwanted" other (Ruddick, 1996; Sibley, 1995). Resistance to this marginalization and other forms of civil and political unrest in physical space are also embodied representations of political identity, which necessitates the need for public space (Mitchell, 1995). However, we cannot always assume that politics and/or political action only occur in public space (Staeheli, 1996). Moreover, the effectiveness of political representations in public space is often bounded by the level and tone of media coverage. Media attention to and representations of resisting groups both influence and are influenced by the presentation of political actors in cyberspace (D'Arcus, 2006).

For example, open forums of representation on the Internet have been significantly successful in the case of the Zapatista uprising in Mexico (Cleaver, 1998; Froehling, 1997; Routledge, 1998). The Zapatistas' political imprint in the mid 1990s is primarily attributed to the use of the Internet in conjunction with sympathetic media coverage. The role of print media and television significantly increased public knowledge of the Zapatistas' cause,. Consequently, the media's intersecting role with Internet politics cannot be ignored. Radio, television and other visual media command a wider audience through quick and highly filtered dissemination of information across a wide expanse of geographic space. Media attention is also fraught with a vast array of challenges and potential power shifts

from sympathy to distain for a particular cause. These mediated spaces between representation and control of political discourse in cyberspace, and the representations of groups ranging from the margins to the center through media coverage offer another lens through which space is shaped and defined.

My examination of the RAWA explores these intersections between the use of Internet technologies and media coverage for a group that is spatially, politically, and ideologically marginalized. The complicated and contingent boundaries in which RAWA operates publicly in physical space are largely erased in cyberspace, providing members with an open forum for defining their own representation. This representation is an essential component for RAWA because the very existence of this association counters local gender norms and international expectations of women in Afghanistan.

Internet, Email and Field Research Methods

My initial contact with RAWA began by reviewing the RAWA website and sending an email message to the association. I also contacted RAWA supporters in the United States and Europe and interviewed international supporters, who operated NGOs and/or conducted regular fundraising operations for RAWA. In addition, I conducted field research on RAWA's programs in Pakistan in the summer of 2003 and winter of 2004/2005.

During my first field visit I traveled with RAWA members between Islamabad and Peshawar as an observer of various projects run by the organization. I conducted formal interviews and informal discussions with RAWA members[2] and male supporters[3] working directly with the development and maintenance of the website and email correspondences, and members of the Foreign Affairs Committees, who traveled internationally. I also interviewed RAWA members, supporters, and recipients of services from RAWA's programs (such as literacy, education, and health care), who had no direct involvement with the website or RAWA's email correspondence. Follow-up interviews and discussions occurred both through email and on a second trip to RAWA's facilities in Islamabad and Peshawar, Pakistan, in the winter of 2004/2005. All interviews were conducted in

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[2] I conducted 45 formal interviews; informal interviews and discussion were conducted with 100 individuals.

[3] Men are prohibited from membership in RAWA. However male supporters are an integral part of the associations' operations and infrastructure. RAWA's membership requirements are restricted to Afghan women who live in Afghanistan and/or as refugees in Pakistan: Therefore, international supporters cannot become members of RAWA (see Brodsky, 2003).

English, Persian (Dari), or Pashto with English translation. The interview data was transcribed and coded for commonalities among the membership, supporters and recipients of RAWA's services to determine the usefulness and impact of the Internet and email technologies.

In addition to these field-research trips to Pakistan, I conducted a content analysis of the website and spent three years working with U.S.-based supporters of RAWA largely as a participant observer to understand theses supporter's fund raising and awareness building methods as well as their links to RAWA in both virtual and physical space. This work included helping to organize speaking and fund-raising events in local spaces as well as observing and participating in list-serve, email, and internet-based communication forums among supporters. RAWA's website is now nearly ten years old; however, the origins, growth and political structure of the organization are much older.

The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan

RAWA was founded in 1977 to mobilize women and improve women's lives, rights and their sociopolitical position in Afghanistan. The development of an independent women's organization was an enigma to the social and political order of Afghan society. Despite state-provisioned movements that increased women's presence and participation in public life, the boundaries of domestic-patriarchal structures and the continued public marginalization of women remained the norm for most Afghan women (Brodsky, 2003; Emadi, 2002; Rubin, 2002). Any disruption to this entrenched social and gender order was a threat to the foundations of society. Therefore, the first meetings between founding leader of RAWA, Meena, and perspective members were conducted behind a curtain in order to ensure Meena's anonymity and enable her to evaluate the "true" commitment of potential members.

This methodical attention to secrecy was further compounded by growing political tensions surrounding a woman's place in private (domestic spaces) and under the "protection" and guardianship of fathers, brothers, or husbands; and a woman's emerging public presence (without wearing the chadori[4]) in Afghanistan. RAWA initially formed a small group of women and male supporters committed to increasing women's rights; however, this goal was complicated within a year of RAWA's founding by the Saur (April) Revolution in the capital city, Kabul.

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[4] Chadori, also known as the burqa, is largely worn by Afghan women in public space. It covers the entire body, including the face with a mesh screen over the eyes. The front of the chadori/burqa is open from the feet to knees to allow for the use of hands.

In April of 1978, the People's Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (PDPA) a group of Marxist intellectuals, supported by the Soviet Union, staged a coup that resulted in the death of the Prime Minister, Mohammed Daoud. The PDPA's power base was localized in Kabul with the intention of ruling over the entire multi-ethnic and spatially dispersed state of Afghanistan. The PDPA instituted several reforms, which led to civil and political revolt in several rural and local communities. According to scholars, the two reforms that caused the most unrest were issues related to women's emancipation and land tenure reform (Emadi, 2002; Rubin, 2002). The PDPA's leadership was plagued with infighting that resulted in the death of the PDPA's leader within a year of the coup. The subsequent leader, Amin, was unable to hold power. The Soviet Union conspired with another PDPA leader, Barbak Karmal, who assumed power in combination with the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan in December of 1979. Amin was killed as part of this struggle.

Despite promises of women's rights by the PDPA and the Soviet Union, RAWA opposed the "illegal rise to power" of the PDPA and the subsequent Soviet invasion and occupation. RAWA was also implored by these events to include the 'freedom of Afghanistan' from Soviet occupation as part of its political organizing for women's rights. During the 1980s, RAWA was continually involved in public demonstrations against the Soviet occupiers, while simultaneously attempting to keep members and supporters secure through clandestine political strategies. For example, although many RAWA members were opposed to wearing the chadori, they regularly wore it to conceal both their identities and political material while traversing public space.

RAWA's political position on the Soviet occupation and women's rights were publicized in the political magazine, *Payam-e-Zan* (Women's Message), which was started by Meena in 1981. RAWA's resistance to Soviet occupation was coupled with a growing concern about and eventual resistance to the growing extremist Islamic insurgency known as the Mujahideen (holy war warriors). The Mujahideen received the bulk of United States funding, which was allocated through Pakistan. The international geopolitical focus on the extremist Islamic insurgents subsequently marginalized moderate groups that were either anti-Soviet communists, democratic, or seeking the return of the former monarchy (O'Ballance, 1993).

RAWA, occupying this in-between and marginalized political space (opposed to the Soviet Union and the extremist Mujahideen resistance known by RAWA as Jehadis[5]), was continually under threat by these opposing factions.

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[5] RAWA labeled the extremist factions of the resistance "Jehadis" to distinguish them from other more moderate resistance groups

Several RAWA members were jailed, tortured, and/or killed during this time by either Jehadi/Mujahideen groups or the KHAD (Afghan arm of the KGB). This precipitated many RAWA members and supporters, including its founding leader, Meena, to flee to Pakistan. In Pakistan, RAWA set-up schools, medical care facilities, orphanages, and a variety of other social programs for Afghan refugees. These programs were located in relatively safe and private spaces where members could discuss and impart their political message to supporters and potential members/supporters in schools and orphanages. RAWA's work with children and youths became a key area for mobilizing support and future members among the refugee populations it served, subsequently enabling RAWA to socially reproduce its ideology.

This relative security experienced by RAWA members in Pakistan was shattered in 1986 when Meena was assassinated in her home in Quetta, Pakistan. After this incident, RAWA members went completely underground and heightened their clandestine approach to operating programs and political strategizing. The next decade in Afghanistan was filled with social and political turbulence including the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989 and the installation of a Soviet-friendly government under the leadership of Najabullah. RAWA marks this government (1989-1992) as the "puppet regime." After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Afghan leadership lacked the financial and military support of the Soviet Union and crumbled under the violent resistance of the Mujahideen. In 1992 the various factions of Mujahideen took over Kabul city and began a brutal and devastating civil war (1992-1996), which left most of the city in ruins and the majority of the country ruled by regional warlords (Olesen, 1995).

The civil-war period was also marked by an extremist-Islamic view of women and their position (or lack thereof) in public and political society. Women had a relative degree of mobility and participation in public, political and economic life, however this was highly circumscribed by fear of public space due to gang rapes and forced marriages of women and girls (Ellis, 2000; Emadi, 2002; Rashid, 2001). This period was particularly difficult for RAWA members, who continued to run underground operations in Afghanistan, including mobile health teams and schools for girls and women. RAWA's Pakistan-based program was also primarily clandestine. However, they were also juxtaposed with public marches, demonstrations, and programs geared toward mobilizing political support through the public presentation of the organization's goals for women's rights, democracy, and secularism in Afghanistan. Although the public demonstrations conducted by RAWA in Pakistan were not conducted in Afghanistan due to security concerns, the public events were geared to the local Afghan refugee population.

These public demonstrations were also highlighted in *Payam-e-Zan* and at times covered by local print media. RAWA's connection to an international community beyond Pakistan was limited (at this time) to communication with

international human rights groups such as Amnesty International. International news coverage of Afghanistan was also minimal during this period without any specific focus on RAWA. However, RAWA from its early formation had a keen interest in developing connections with international sympathizers. During her leadership of RAWA, Meena traveled to Europe in the mid 1980s for a speaking tour about RAWA and against the Soviet occupation. However, from the time of Meena's visit to Europe until the advent of RAWA's website, there was no regular practice of RAWA members traveling internationally on speaking tours.

RAWA experienced a tremendous amount of financial difficulty due to the civil war and their limited ability to raise funds from a population that was in a continual state of flux and growing increasingly impoverished. The needs of the communities served by RAWA were outgrowing its capabilities. RAWA was forced to close several of its facilities, including the Malalai Hospital, which was operating in Quetta Pakistan until 1996.

Internet Technology and Email: Connection and International Fundraising

This period of decline and relative isolation began to change when a few RAWA members and supporters proposed the development of a website. In late 1996, as the Taliban were taking hold of the majority of Afghanistan and instituting brutal reforms including bans on technology and the removal of women from all aspects of public life (Rashid, 2001), RAWA entered cyberspace (www.rawa.org). In the early weeks and months of its web presence RAWA received a few emails from curious web surfers, activists, and women's rights advocates located in the North America, Europe, Australia, and Japan. This early communication led to the formation of support networks in these regional areas. Some of these international observers of RAWA's website became avid supporters and eventually began to raise funds for RAWA's programs. The majority of the funds raised internationally came from supporters living in countries outside South Asia and the Middle East with mass Internet accessibility.

This collection of international supporters also formed local networks among each other and through RAWA. The networking among supporters tends to be spatially localized and is occasionally transnational. National and local groups self-identify as RAWA supporters in conjunction with their physical locations (i.e. Friends of RAWA in Japan, RAWA Supporters Santa Barbara, RAWA Supporters in Italy, RAWA Supporters in the UK, RAWA Supporters in Australia, RAWA Support Group in the USA, and FemAid, with RAWA Supporters in France, RAWA Supporters in Germany, and the Afghan Women's Mission). RAWA's website links to the websites of each group listed above and these groups are subsequently linked to RAWA. There are also some but inconsistent links among the international supporters' websites. Collaboration and connection among

international support groups occur on occasion. However, the day-to-day work of supporting RAWA (i.e. fundraising and awareness building) remains largely within national boundaries and is primarily localized within countries. The majority of fund raising for RAWA occurs in physical space and is conducted by supporters in their local communities (these events are generally organized by individuals or small groups of 1-6 members). For example the Afghan Women's Mission (AWM) is the main collection agency for RAWA in the U.S. Various individuals and groups throughout the United States will organize events and/or raise money for RAWA without direct involvement from the AWM. However, the proceeds from these local events are sent to AWM, because of it is a registered non-profit agency and able to directly transfers funds to RAWA.

Internet and email technologies allow communication across space, quickly and with minimal expense, while the organizational work associated with fundraising and other public events occurs in physical space. Internet-based fund raising programs, such as on-line credit card donations and programs, such as virtual "Adopt-a-Child" programs (for RAWA's orphans) also compliment on-the-ground fund generation efforts. Knowledge of these programs is principally disseminated by international supporters in their local spheres of influence, such as speaking engagements or the use of local television, radio, and print media, and electronic mail. It is evident, from my research, that the Internet and email technologies are important and necessary tools of representation, communication and fund generation in physical space across various political boundaries. However, despite a transnational component to RAWA's operations, the association's political vision and mission remains focused locally, on Afghanistan. For example, regardless of international supporters' commitment to RAWA, only Afghan women living in Afghanistan (or as refugees in Pakistan) can become members of RAWA.

The first page of RAWA's website also reinforces its localized political struggle. Although the front page's links to content on the website changes regularly, it always includes a picture of the founding leader, Meena, and the following text in both Persian-Dari and English: "RAWA is the oldest political/social organization of Afghan women struggling for peace, freedom, democracy and women's rights in fundamentalist blighted Afghanistan since 1977. If you are freedom loving and antifundamentalists you are with RAWA. Support and help us."

The main focus of the website is to building awareness, create international connections, secure donations. During the early formation of the website, email correspondences with international supporters were used as a motivational tactic for RAWA members to relieve feelings of extreme isolation and hopelessness, particularly during the Taliban regime, which was notorious for state-sponsored acts of misogyny. Most RAWA members do not actively participate in the

maintenance of the website or use of email technologies (i.e. all emails sent to RAWA are organized and responded to by only 1 or 2 members at any given time). However emails from international supporters are communicated to the wider RAWA community in various ways. For RAWA members and supporters this entry into cyberspace marked a crucial departure from the embodied experiences of marginality.

Website as Revolution: From Isolation to Fame

RAWA members and supporters directly involved with the development and maintenance of the website, the use of email, and the experience with international travel highlight the importance of the email communications from individuals outside Afghanistan and Pakistan. The supportive tone of the emails and interest in assisting RAWA were subsequently used by the membership as a motivational tactic to relieve feelings of extreme isolation and hopelessness in refuges camps, particularly during the Taliban regime (1996-2001). Emails were translated from English to Persian-Dari and read aloud at community meetings and events in refugee camps. All RAWA members I interviewed spoke openly about the intense isolation and lack of support they felt and the subsequent value they placed on communications from "the outside world" through email. The following quote is a representative example of the importance of supportive email:

> It [E-mail] was very important because we suffered in the dark in the past and no one from any country, never knew about RAWA. About how important our struggle is and we struggled here completely alone. … It gives you energy besides not just financially, and not just politically, even the kindness of our supporters and that they appreciate RAWA's work and they know the value of RAWA's work. It gives really energy for all of us. It is something that we always said, how is it that this world is unaware of our struggle; how they don't know about our suffering, so for this to happen it is really something for us (Parvana,[6] 2003).

The extreme isolation felt by members and supporters of RAWA and the Afghan refugees they work with was a common topic of discussion during my fieldwork in Pakistan. Consequently, in our discussions on the current situation in Afghanistan, the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the continual change in Afghan politics, and waning international media attention on Afghanistan, and the fear of being

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[6] Pseudonyms are used for all research subjects.

"forgotten once again" (referring to the isolation experienced during the civil war and Taliban) was ever present.

RAWA members' alleviation of isolation was also linked to the media attention received from various local, regional, and international media outlets. This was precipitated by RAWA's presence on the Internet, its growing numbers of committed and diligent supporters in the U.S. and the interest in RAWA by "famous feminists," such as Eve Ensler and Jane Fonda. RAWA members often joked over tea or a meal about being "famous" since the creation of the website and the media attention that followed. Members and supporters working with the website or on RAWA's Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC) regularly highlighted the importance of media coverage with the website and their linkages to international supporters. For example:

> This [the website] was [started] during the Taliban time – a very difficult time, it made us very excited, we could not imagine there would be a day that in one night [that we would have] more than three thousand visitors to the website which was the case after Oprah Winfrey mentioned RAWA on her show. And you know we were showered with emails, we never imagined that could happen. This connected us to the world, before that only a few international organizations, such as Amnesty International knew about us and our activities. It was always our wish to establish contact with all of these organization but we just did not have the means to do that. In many ways it was a revolution getting our message out, establishing contact internationally, getting financial support, getting political support, moral support, and basically everything that has come out of the website. Supporters like yourself, projects like the book[7], money that goes to establish projects. It was one of the biggest revolutions in the history of RAWA (Nasmeena, 2003).

Nasmeena and many other RAWA members and supporters identified the website as a revolutionary addition to the association, and they continually attributed their tremendous growth of financial and moral support from internationals directly to their presence in cyberspace. This web-presence was coupled with growing attention from local and international media outlets. Media attention was connected to the website, and the website became more prominent because of this media attention.

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[7] Refers to *With All Our Strength: The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan* by Ann Brodsky (2003).

Similar to the Zapatistas' intersections of media and Internet technology, RAWA became abundantly aware of the importance of remaining relevant to the media. Although space constraints do not allow for a thorough discussion of the narrow representations of Afghan women in U.S. and other international media, it is important to note the significance of RAWA's public media representations that both reinforced and countered images of Afghan women as victims in need of support and savior from the benevolent 'west'. Indeed RAWA members' international travel to various functions sponsored by their international supporters built awareness about the situation of women in Afghanistan and provided financial assistance rather than 'western' guidance from international sympathizers. RAWA's political tactics and strategies are significantly different from the binary assumptions about Muslim women (or women living in Islamic countries) found in (non-Muslim majority spaces) popular mainstream discourses.

RAWA participated in several acts of "unveiling" during public events in the U.S., such as the Oprah Winfrey show (Whitlock, 2005). I argue that RAWA's public performances of unveiling were opportunities for the strategic use of cultural-essentialism to foster international monetary support for their local programs and political activities. RAWA's clear and sophisticated understanding of the sound bite and binary (good/bad) analysis provided through visual media presented a tactical challenge. RAWA's participation in this form of "theatrical politics" was effectively one method of performing the expected scripts of female resistance in the 'west' through public unveiling (Routledge, 1998, 255; Whitlock, 2005). RAWA's media savvy is also mediated by its lack of control over this medium. For example, RAWA's website is rich with images and graphics that visually construct a particular representation of Afghan society and politics.

Many RAWA members and supporters who are not directly involved with the website and/or international travel, critiqued these visual and textual representations because they provided a narrow window of their lives and experiences of displacement. RAWA members and supporters without direct involvement with the website clearly identified the importance of the website and were keenly aware of its virtual representation of place and politics. One respondent noted, "We are not connected to the website – *we are the website*. We live the website it is an example of our lives. It is not virtual here" (Massoda, 2003). This quote resonated in formal interviews and casual conversations, when members and/or supporters would point out to me the "realities" of their lives, which are not realized nor experienced in cyberspace. The day-to-day sites and situations of refugee life were the embodied and much more interesting experiences to my participants than the representations of this life on the Internet. However, each person I spoke with was abundantly aware of the tactical importance of the website and corresponding media attention for financial assistance.

Moreover, RAWA's media performances and use of Internet technology provide the association with a venue for voicing their counter-politics and conversely run the risk of becoming more symbolic that effectual (Bickel, 2003; Routledge, 1998). Thus, the use of web-based technologies exemplify the complicated, fluid and often tenuous movements between RAWA members' counter hegemonic discourses and practices regarding Afghan women and politics and their intersecting links to and involvement with various aspects of hegemony.

RAWA's operational linkages to hegemonic discourses, politics, and neo-liberal markets are also methods for increasing international attention and financial resources to fund their projects locally (in Pakistan and Afghanistan) and foster social and political resistance. RAWA's counter-hegemonic position is clearly evident in its operational structure and political discourse, which are outside the binary of Islamic fundamentalist and hegemonic (U.S.) conceptions of gender, economics, and power. For example, RAWA's core-membership[8] is divided into several operating committees. Each committee focuses on a specific project or runs a particular program for RAWA (such as publications, schools, orphanages, or website). The committee members are asked to participate in a particular committee based on their skills. The configuration of each committee is determined through consensus decision or voting among the membership. For example the leadership committee is made-up of 11 women who are elected each year by the membership.

As a political women's organization and due to its criticism of U.S. geopolitics, military action, and cooperation with the Northern Alliance[9] in Afghanistan, RAWA remains spatially marginalized from the core power structure in Afghanistan. This outsider position – both spatially and ideologically – curtails RAWA's spheres of influence in local and international political structures in Afghanistan. RAWA's tactics of resistance therefore remain "below the radar," locally and internationally (De Certeau, 1984). Thus, RAWA's continued focus on rhetoric and documentary resistance is a primary site of engagement. Cyberspace and the media are key spaces for RAWA to counter prevailing and/or dominate discourses and actions about Afghan women, geopolitics, and governance in the emerging Afghan state. RAWA's use of documentation as mentioned above was, and in many ways remains, a central component of its resistance tactics. This form

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[8] RAWA's core-membership consists of 250-300 women, who are identified as active (full) members based on their full-time commitment to RAWA. The larger membership consists of approximately 1500 members, 1500 additional female supporters and 1500 male supporters.

[9] The Northern Alliance, also known as the United Front, was one of the extremist Mujahideen groups that were funded by the United States and were an emerging military force during the civil war in Afghanistan. RAWA attributes them with several human rights atrocities and war crimes.

of resistance, was more significant during the Taliban regime because of the forced removal of women from all aspects of life related to public space, without the chadori and accompanied by a mahram (close male relative whom a woman cannot marry).

Documentary Resistance: What is Lost in Media Translation

RAWA documentary-resistance during the Taliban regime focused on capturing state-sponsored public violence against both men and women. Images of Taliban violence in action and the corporeal effects of this violence were published in RAWA's political magazine *Payam-e-Zan* and on the website. For RAWA, these images provided a visual "truth" of the human-rights abuses and misogynistic brutality of the Taliban. Documenting the corporeal results of violence by the Jehadi/Mujahideen and Taliban on the Internet publicly rendered "power visible, and thus negotiable" (Routledge, 1998, 244). These images and videos were sent to international media outlets with the expectation that they would "shock" the international community, discredit the Taliban as a legitimate government, and lead to international assistance and removal of the Taliban from power.

One primary example is a video-taped image of a chadori-clad woman, Zarmeena's public execution by a gunshot wound to the head in a Kabul football (soccer) stadium. The video (and still images) of this execution were placed on the website with RAWA's textual guide, explaining that Zarmeena was a victim of intense physical abuse from her husband, the man she was accused of murdering. Moreover, her husband's family had forgiven her for the crime, which under Afghan-Islamic law exonerated her. The Taliban carried out the execution despite these caveats.

RAWA's website provided a space to illustrate this event beyond the borders of Pakistan/Afghanistan and the spatial reaches of *Payam-e-Zan*. This and other documentations of corporeal violence and suffering also precipitated additional support for RAWA and the "adoption" of Afghan women as a cause for several U.S. based feminist organizations. Through lobbying efforts of the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF) and the economic and social power of Mavis Leno (wife of Jay Leno), by 1999 the U.S. no longer recognized the Taliban as a legitimate government. Although this was a symbolic victory for the FMF, it did little to usurp the Taliban's power, or significantly improve the lives of Afghan women. Moreover, this campaign to de-legitimize the Taliban became associated with U.S.-based feminists rather than indigenous Afghan feminist organizations (Brown, 2002; Hunt, 2002; Rashid, 2001; Young, 2003). Thus, in many ways the media attention that focused on RAWA during the FMF campaign foreshadowed the important and significant role of the media for RAWA members and their

subsequent lack of control over the media's use of their political images, rhetoric, and struggle for democracy and women's rights particularly after 9-11-01.

Prior to 9-11-01 most international news outlets (e.g. BBC and CNN) would not air the videotape of Zarmeena's execution because it was "too graphic" and would not appeal to their viewers. However, after 9-11-01 it was continually aired on CNN and the BBC, often in conjunction with a documentary film about RAWA entitled *Beneath the Veil*[10]. Subsequent uses of this video clip filtered into a variety of media outlets, largely without crediting RAWA members or more importantly without their analysis of this public execution. Additional images of corporeal suffering and/or chadori-clad Afghan women begging on the streets of Kabul were integrated into RAWA's virtual portrayal of public space in Afghanistan under the Taliban, which both represented and defined this space (Jackson, 1997).

This conceptualization of space was juxtaposed with ideal images of what Afghanistan could be if RAWA were in power – or RAWA's imagined Afghanistan. This vision of Afghanistan did (and does) not exist. Nevertheless, members were able to illustrate this imagined Afghanistan through images and textual descriptions of their projects and social services. This construction of place represented a counter-image to the visual display of what RAWA refers to as "fundamentalist blighted" Afghanistan. Some examples of these counter-images are smiling children in RAWA's orphanages, women working as part of income-generating projects, and women as teachers and students in literacy classes. These images portray the private and semi-private spaces operated by RAWA – with the relative authority to decide who is included or excluded from these spaces (Sibley, 1995). RAWA's images of public demonstrations in Pakistan and women as active participants in nonviolent resistance to the political status quo also construct a counter-image of gender and public place.

These counter images have not become the dominant visual representations of Afghanistan or Afghan women in U.S. media outlets (Whitlock, 2005; Young 2003). Thus, the appropriation of RAWA's images of corporeal violence and chadori-clad women are neither accompanied by RAWA's textual descriptions nor juxtaposed with these counter-images of women demonstrating in public space or operating in the spaces of RAWA's social projects. The primary mainstream U.S. media's counter images to the chadori-clad Afghan woman are unveiled women that have been "liberated" by U.S. military intervention (Falah, 2005; Hunt, 2002; Young, 2003).

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[10] Saira Shah produced the film, which was subsequently aired on CNN and the BBC. CNN won the Peabody medal for airing Shah's film *Beneath the Veil* and her later work *Unholy War*.

The perceived need of Afghan women and RAWA specifically is directly correlated to the amount and consistency of donations received. During the Taliban rule of Afghanistan, the perceived need of women in Afghanistan was high. However, politics in Afghanistan was not well covered in the international news media and fund generation was limited to the work of individual and collective supporters through fund-raising events in their local communities. Conversely, after the events of 9-11-01, international knowledge of Afghanistan and the conditions for women under the Taliban grew tremendously.

During this international media blitz, RAWA's international supporters were able to raise a remarkable amount of funds for RAWA.[11] As Afghanistan moved from the center again to the margins of international media attention and the focus of this attention has turned from the victimization and oppression of Afghan women under the Taliban to the liberation and emancipation of women by U.S. military operations, financial assistance and donations for RAWA's programs began to decrease. The rhetoric of Afghan women's liberation and the positive aspects of the interim and now elected president Hamid Karzai, has dominated the mainstream media. Competing reports of warlordism, continued violence against women and girls, and the limited reach of the international military forces and/or the current government beyond Kabul city have become increasingly marginalized by this dominant discourse.

In many respects the victimization of Afghan women under the chadori or by the Taliban also increased the amount of sympathy from international supporters, and subsequent donations followed. Thus, the assumption that women are "liberated" because of U.S. military actions is a double burden to RAWA: it co-opts their struggle for women's rights and democracy without effectively providing either; and it displaces RAWA's actions and intervention in political discourse as "no longer necessary." Similar to this disconnection between RAWA's images and textual representation of violence and their counter-images, the removal of the Taliban from power was disconnected from RAWA's ardent disapproval of the U.S.'s allegiance with the Northern Alliance (the main opposition group to the Taliban). For example:

> Even after 11th September we became famous on CNN, BBC we have found many other supporters who are working with us, mostly it was journalists and it was the website and the best way to raise a voice against Taliban. Even now they know very well about RAWA, but they are not calling us because we speak out against Northern Alliance and they don't want that because CNN is with America.

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[11] RAWA was not able to provide me with exact numbers. However, it stated that this time period yielded the largest amount of financial support from international donors.

> Everybody was against Taliban, so it was okay then but now that RAWA is against Northern Alliance. They don't want that. … They cut out the parts in the article that are negative against Northern Alliance (Aslan, 2003).

Several RAWA members addressed their concerns about the Northern Alliance and believed there was a conspiratorial removal of RAWA's political position from this discourse. Consequently (and more predominantly on my second trip to Pakistan), RAWA members and supporters articulated their excitement for RAWA's fame and acknowledgement internationally, and simultaneously lamented the subtle and blatant silencing of their political position in the U.S. and international media. Their website, however, has remained an open and "safe" space for representation and continued fund generation.

Is the Revolution for Sale? Raising Funds through the Global Market Economy

RAWA's operational structure and use of funds it receives (from international donors, membership dues, and local projects) is based on communal and socialist models of distribution. For example, resources are shared as equitably as possible among the RAWA members, supporters, and community and through its social programs. Health care services, education, orphanages, and other social services offered by RAWA are provided to Afghans free of charge.

The funds for RAWA's socialist structure are significantly supported from core aspects of the global capitalist market economy. The membership also sells its publications, revolutionary slogans, and political posters on their website. One can also purchase images of RAWA's founding leader, Meena, RAWA's insignia, and other "revolutionary representations" of RAWA's politics on coffee mugs, t-shirts, mouse pads, and an array of other mass products through *cafeshops.com*. RAWA is actively participating in the commercialization of its political ideals, slogans, and images. This form of commercialization operates within the global market economy of mass production, commercialization, and hyper-consumption – where anything and everything can be packaged for sale (Klein, 2000). RAWA's participation in this system also counters corporate hegemony by selling and profiting from its own representation of revolution, which is then reallocated and redistributed based on their socialist and communal system of distribution. Although their political images and textual representations of place through their website have been misappropriated for various political and economic interests outside of RAWA's control or profit, they have been able to manage and control the distribution and sale of their revolutionary logos.

Similarly, fundraisers held by RAWA's international supporters will often sell handicrafts made by Afghan women and/or purchased at a low cost in Pakistani marketplaces and then sold at 'first world' prices in the North America, Europe, Japan, and Australia. This method of purchase, spatial movement, and resale both benefits from and operates on the margins of the global market economy. In addition, several books have been written about RAWA and many of the authors have donated all or a portion of their royalties to RAWA. These books are predominantly targeted and sold to audiences in North American, Europe and Australia. The large economic inequities between the global 'north' and global 'south' are therefore both the underlining roots of continued conflict and sociopolitical unrest in Afghanistan, and the spaces within which RAWA obtains a significant portion of its operating funds.

RAWA members also speak with pride about the association's integrity and inability to be swayed by monetary desires. For example, RAWA will not accept conditional funding. Thus, when individuals or organizations donate funds to RAWA there is no expectation that they will be involved in deciding how RAWA will utilize the funds. Donors will sponsor specific projects (i.e. an orphanage or school); however they do not participate in the operational structure, curriculum, or management of these programs. RAWA is required to provide documentation for its use of funds and this has led RAWA to adjust its management of funds based on the systems required by various donors, rather than using RAWA's own accounting system.

RAWA has also bent to the will of the global spaces of representation. For example the website is multilingual, but the majority of communications between RAWA members and their international supporters occur in English. Supporters in non-English speaking countries such as Germany or Japan, also communicate with RAWA in English. Moreover, translations of RAWA's website in Japanese, Spanish, French, German, etc. are first translated to English from Persian (Dari) or Pashto and then translated from English into the other language. English has become the primary language through which RAWA represents itself internationally. In addition to the global reaches of the English language, living in Pakistan has increased the knowledge and use of English among many RAWA members and male supporters who attended schools in Pakistan, where English is the language of instruction from fourth grade on in a majority of schools (exemplifying the British colonial legacy). The increased use of English by RAWA members is both strategically essential for operating internationally and exemplifies the global and hegemonic representation of the English language. RAWA's use of web-based technologies and its linkages to and operations at the international scale both counters and compliments hegemonic discourses, and political and economic systems.

Internet Technology as a Counter and Compliment to Hegemony

RAWA's spatial fluidity in cyber and physical space is both embellished and compromised by international media attention. Many marginalized groups use the media in effective ways to raise their political voice beyond the boundaries of their states/nations. As part of a counter and critical geopolitics it is essential to highlight the day-to-day resistance of groups such as RAWA, which continue to labor, educate, and politically mobilize after international attention shifts to the next conflict, war, or political "hot spot." RAWA's use of media technologies is particularly difficult because of its lack of control over how it is represented in this medium. RAWA members are also competing for space in an oversaturated market of political resistance efforts, conflict zones, misogyny, and human rights abuses.

This case study highlights the ability of dominant discourses to override complex and competing epistemologies of Afghan women. Conversely, because RAWA members are actively engaging with these hegemonic ways of knowing and are simultaneously carving out a space of representation amid various dichotomies (e.g. of veiled/victimized – unveiled/liberated), they are also subtle (and at times active) participants in the reinforcement of these scripts through acts of "strategic essentialism" (Spivak, 1990). RAWA members' performances of strategic essentialism operate dangerously close to exemplifying hegemonic discourses that helped to further legitimate the violent use of force by the U.S. to remove the Taliban from power (Young, 2003). The opening up of Afghanistan for international aid and U.S.-based nation building has also introduced competition for RAWA's political benevolence and mobilization through its social programs. For example, during the Taliban regime, RAWA was one of a few groups that continued to operate and politically mobilize; and it was the only women-led (or women focused) group to self-identify as political.

Today, RAWA is no longer one of the only or one of a few organizations Afghan women can approach to seek refugee, assistance, and/or education. This competition is further complicated by RAWA's unwillingness to compromise with fundamentalists, the continued need to remain clandestine, and its steadfast commitment to its political ideologies. RAWA's use of the Internet and email technologies provides a vehicle for public representation, and fund generation. However, the manifestations of its effectiveness over time demonstrate temporal obstacles precipitated by waxing and waning media attention and RAWA's continued spatial and ideological marginalization in Afghanistan.

RAWA's international work both operates within and benefits from hegemonic flows of capital and dominant discourses about Muslim and Afghan women. RAWA's use and appropriation of capital flows and income inequities also exemplify what Katz (2005) discusses as the intersecting relationship between resilience, reworking, and resistance. RAWA continues to engage in proven acts of resistance through its counter-social and political programs and their visual and

textual representations of political problems and prescriptive solutions. RAWA's localized mission and vision for Afghanistan is resilient and principally uncompromised by its negotiations in cyberspace and interactions with international supporters and other geopolitical and economic actors. Thus, RAWA members make many compromises and operate within the structures of hegemony and the "free" market economy as a means to an eventual end. This reworking of capitalist inequities are both beneficial for fund generation and highly contingent on remaining relevant in the exceedingly competitive market for media coverage and global-public relevance. Therefore, dismantling the global hegemonic discourses about Muslim women or the system of the global market economy are not primary goals of RAWA; however, this is a crucial aspect of their resistance locally. Working and reworking within this system, RAWA has been able to increase its efforts in the local spaces of its immediate and long-term sociopolitical goals.

RAWA's fame and its mediated and un-mediate international representation exemplify a hyper-visibility that does not occur for RAWA locally. RAWA's local operations in Pakistan and Afghanistan remain clandestine. RAWA is more notorious than visible in the physical spaces of Afghanistan. The suspicion and public admonishment of RAWA by extremist factions in both formal and informal positions of power slows RAWA's public mobilization efforts. It is currently reluctant to accept new members because it fears potential betrayal. The invisibility of RAWA's projects in Afghanistan further ensures that it remains at the margins of social and political change. Thus, the extent to which RAWA is more well known internationally than locally and the long-term impacts of this phenomenon on the organization is a compelling and important aspect for further research.

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