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POSTCOLONIAL VISIBILITY: THE CASE OF NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN MOROCCO

Abstract:

The paper examines the implications of global visibility discourses and technologies in postcolonial country contexts. Building on postcolonial studies and a communication centered perspective, the paper puts forwards a framework that illustrates how visibility discourses and technologies constitute a third space where the identities of the colonized and the colonizer are created and/or resisted. Empirically, the paper uses a multiple case study of two NGOs operating in Morocco and ethnographic methods. The findings indicate that a communication centered understanding of postcolonialism casts a novel outlook on how the distributed agency of visibility discourses and technologies provides unique opportunities as well as challenges (e.g., invisibility, humanitarian surveillance, etc.) that affect the work of NGO workers. The paper concludes by emphasizing the need for upcoming research to question how and if visibility discourses and technologies could be employed responsibly in postcolonial settings to assist those in need, prevent abuse, and protect people from harm.

Keywords: globalization; visibility; postcolonialism; human rights
**Introduction**

The allure of visibility as an instrument of control resides in the visual metaphor of casting light onto what would be otherwise invisible. Visibility may be thought of as one of modern societies’ largest discursive system of life management, geared toward updating and improving (see Birchall, 2015 for a review of visibility and biopolitics). The power of such global visibility discourse is thought to lie in its performative dimension: transforming modern organizations into democratic, efficient and cost-effective entities (see Flyverbom, Hansen & Christensen 2015). Visibility discourses and the technologies used to implement these (i.e., reports, metrics, policies, etc., Hansen & Flyverbom, 2015) are thought to be ways of opening up organizations for external scrutiny and therefore visibility provides a basis for enhanced control by those parties with the legitimate right to exercise it. However, there is relatively little empirical evidence about how visibility discourses are enacted, technologies deployed, and whether these inform and enable substantive change or bring unexpected and unintended consequences.

Indeed, critical visibility studies are burgeoning in organization and communication research, arguing that visibility can no longer be treated as the secure opposite of what is hidden or as the simple unveiling of data (Flyverbom, Leonard & Stohl, 2018). This is because visibility is not defined by sight but by an interplay of discursive and material elements (e.g., a bundle of texts, technologies and practices) that once assembled become active in organizing. Such interplay creates both visibilities and invisibilities by shadowing certain organizational aspects while illuminating others (see Author 2016 for a review). In this respect, calls are made for a more dynamic and fluid conceptualization that captures the shifting relations of political sovereignty, freedoms and the making of institutional realities in which visibility is involved (Cruz, 2018). Importantly, research on visibility tends to be focused on Euro- and North-American contexts and there is a need for alternative non-Western centric analyses (Prasad & Prasad, 2003). To address such gaps and in order to draw deeper relations between critical intercultural and organizational communication research (Allen, 2007; Ganesh, Zoller, & Cheney, 2005), this study addresses a relatively untapped conceptual space through a postcolonial analysis of organizational visibility.

Empirically, there is scarce evidence concerning how global visibility discourses are implemented through different technologies in formerly colonized, non-US or European worlds. The point of such
criticism can be compelling: visibility can be understood as something to be achieved, and intertwined with power, surveillance and authority (Ganesh et al., 2005). In this politicized sense, the resulting visibilities are less a matter of becoming physically visible than a matter of attaining power positions and recognition, of which being visible serves as a metaphor (Chow, 2010). Notably, international non-profit organizations (NGOs) are some of the most relevant organizations for the examination of visibility since NGOs are embedded in international power relations, which require attention to the idea of “untrustworthy natives,” (Hanchey, 2018, p. 61), the legacy of Western visibility, and the impact of NGOs on policy and public opinion. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to explore how NGOs produce and bestow visibility on select parts of the world and deal with the resulting implications. The following research questions are asked:

What are the implications of global visibility discourses and technologies when they are implemented in postcolonial country contexts by local and international NGOs?

Methodologically, this paper focuses on a multiple case study of two NGOs (one local and one international) in order to compare and contrast global visibility discourses and their local enactments. We approach this study as an extreme case to exploit “opportunities to explore a significant phenomenon under rare or extreme circumstances” (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p. 27). We focus on this case for three main reasons: (1) It is representative of a postcolonial context where the need for visibilities is triggered by the repressive tactics of the Moroccan regime, which create demands for openness and disclosure concerning how institutions apply the rule of law (judicial, police etc.). This type of context provides rare findings that are generalizable to other similar settings: given the current political and economic situation in many countries where there are significant concerns regarding freedom of expression and civic participation, there are increasing pressures for visibility and NGOs now work all over the globe to promote visibility as a solution to democratic governance (Birchall, 2015). (2) The case provides novel understandings concerning the challenges surrounding the development and implementation of global visibility discourses. This problem is still pervasive since international NGOs such as the World Bank tend to promote visibility based on a global neoliberal order that is defined by the ability of transnational capital to operate across borders. In such contexts, market relationships heavily structured in favor of the global North are perceived as the only possibility for creating visibility and the organization of the international economy (Murphy & Hugh, 2015).
In studying a recent, contemporary phenomenon in a real-life setting and with both an exploratory and descriptive focus on postcolonial visibility issues, we are able to provide insight into the impact and unintended consequences created by visibility discourses.

Theoretically, in this paper we theorize how visibility discourses and technologies interact with postcolonial contexts. The version of postcolonialism we advance here explains the liminal, ambivalent, and hybrid nature of visibility discourses and technologies. This is different from extant research because it explains how the colonized (i.e., local NGOs) mobilize and are mobilized by the visibility discourses employed by colonizers (i.e., international NGOs) in their attempt to build specific identities. We argue that global visibility discourses create differences/pluralism but, paradoxically, situate individuals within a colonizing framework of visibility which limits possibilities of visibility to address key socio-cultural, political, and environmental issues, introducing negative implications. We thus show how a communication-centered notion of postcolonialism explains the way in which agency is distributed among humans, as well as non-humans such as visibility discourses and technologies. This is an important contribution because it offers an alternative theorization of visibility in postcolonial settings and explains how hegemonic identities are simultaneously constructed and undermined by visibility. Rather than just contributing to visibility scholarship, this study also speaks to scholars doing research in the areas of postcolonial contexts and international organizational scholarship. It moves away from Western-centric approaches by foregrounding culturally relevant theoretical and methodological tools while doing organizational communication research (Pal & Buzzanell, 2013).

The paper proceeds as follows: we start by discussing based on a stream of organizational communication studies that visibility discourses and technologies have agency and, counterintuitively, might lead to negative outcomes. We then draw on postcolonial studies to build a framework that illustrates how visibility discourses and technologies translate locally and constitute a third space where the identities of the colonized and the colonizer are created and/or resisted through processes of mimicry and juxtaposition. The ethnographic methods and data collection are presented next and are followed by the empirical analysis. The findings indicate that a communication centered understanding of postcolonialism casts a novel outlook on how the distributed agency of visibility discourses and technologies provides unique opportunities as well as
challenges (e.g., invisibility, humanitarian surveillance, etc.) that affect the work of NGO workers. Finally, we conclude by discussing the need for upcoming research to question how and if visibility discourses and technologies could be employed responsibly in postcolonial settings to assist those in need, prevent abuse, and protect people from harm.

**Theoretical Framework**

*Visibility discourses and technologies*

The paradox and the problem of visibility is that there is a tendency to act as if one believes in the adequacy and completeness of what is disclosed through visibility whilst knowing that it is not (Brighenti, 2002). In this way, precisely in the name of visibility, organizational realities are “knowingly eclipsed” (Roberts, 2017, p. 2) as representations and associated visibilities become increasingly divorced from the operational realities they are supposed to manage. Factors contributing to the ubiquitous ideal of visibility (what has been termed the “transparent society”, Vattimo, 1999, p. 4) are the intensified use of technologies and the increasingly prominent circulation of information. Such visibility ideals, however, are not to be understood to create a society that is more ‘transparent’ but rather more complex and chaotic (Vattimo, 1999). This is because the proliferation of mediated forms of communication seems not to produce more visibility but to have the opposite effect (Fleming, 2002). By changing patterns of illumination digital technologies cast new shadows and with them new domains of darkness beyond their arcs of light (Zizek, 1997). This means that the more one believes the axiom ‘to see is to know’ the more haunted he or she is by what hovers beyond the edges of the visible (cf. Zizek, 1997; for a review on the limitations of oculacentrism in organizational research see Kavanagh, 2004). A stream of organizational communication has indeed highlighted that an untampered celebration of visibility discourses can fuel false hopes and produce problematic consequences (Christensen, 2002). The data that is produced by technologies of visibility (rankings, biometrics, reports, etc.) are often at best ‘flawed approximations’ (Chua, 1995) which are nevertheless able to hold and bring together different interests. As a result, to manage only based on visibility technologies is to deny or ignore the ways in which the resulting mechanisms, numbers or indicators are always abstractions from a much richer and complex detailed context (Roberts, 2017). For instance, when members of political parties are expected to articulate full visibility as their *raison d’être*, the
result is more opacity. Especially in times of crisis, members of political parties are found to create new forms of secrecy to avoid the surveilling gaze of visibility technologies in their efforts to maintain or create boundaries of visibility between front- and backstage (Ringel, 2018). In the name of visibility, thus, organizations produce new types of closure (Christensen & Cheney, 2018).

With few notable exceptions (see Cruz, 2018), research on visibility in postcolonial settings usually focuses on two levels: more and better (e.g., Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2014). When applied to those typically situated in the global South, visibility is embraced as a guarantee of democratic participation and trust, even though potential side effects may occur (O’Neill, 2002). For instance, the onset of multifarious civil society protests in Morocco until the present day are confronted with such a contradictory set of conditions (Bouchra, 2011). Emerging social movements and NGOs aim to create layered visibilities in the governance of the Moroccan kingdom by documenting and reporting on human rights violations through the use of technologies (mission and annual reports, metrics, etc., Amnesty International, 2015). These visibility discourses are related to attempts of changing power positions of some groups and stopping certain practices of the powerful (empower minorities instead of royal elite, ensure freedom of speech for journalists instead of state-controlled outlets, etc.). NGOs’ visibility discourses are intended spark a media debate and point to the contestation of an order and existing authority positions (Bouchra, 2011). In so doing, NGOs members use technologies of visibility in order to create identities that would aid the emancipation of the respective groups (Chow, 2010). Visibility practices are therefore performative and influence actors’ political mobilization, their identities and power relations (Flyverbom & Albu, 2016; Ezzamel, 2012). But, at the same time, these can, unexpectedly, also introduce negative effects: the nexus of visibility discourses and technologies can highlight the needs of some groups while excluding and silencing others and/or subjecting them to surveillance (Garsten & de Montoya, 2008).

Attempts to create visibility can thus lead to invisibility, and little is known about what the resulting constraints are or if these can be circumvented. In both research and practice calls are made for more empirical evidence on these matters in developing economies and postcolonial settings (Cruz, 2018). For example, NGOs such as the Transparency International (TI) operating in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) regions, employ visibility technologies to articulate discourses of visibility and social responsibility
to local communities. While TI managers hinted at the complexity of applying global visibility discourses to local environments, visibility technologies such as the Corruption Perception Index, generated hierarchized relationships and authority positions for TI (Neu & Gomez, 2006). The result was that layered visibilities created for citizens coexisted and collided with invisibilities of international institutions that provided financial resources and established governance regimes, creating risks of destabilizing those regions sought to improve (Funaki & Glencourse, 2014).

(In)visibilities resulting from the enactment of global discourses are not simply modes of representations but also modes of reproduction and constitution of organizations’ and their members’ identities (Scott, 2015). As our empirical findings later show, informants from local NGOs deem visibility technologies to be “mechanisms” and “guides”, “international standards that they should follow”, and that generate “success”. In this respect, we conceptualize visibility technologies (ranging from legal documents to metrics, memos, technologies, etc.) to have agency as they make a difference in the way human beings relate to each other, structure interactions, and constitute/enact social collectivities (Vásquez et al., 2016). These visibility practices, for example, dictate rules of conduct; give some people authority while depriving others of it; assist people in managing tensions or making decisions; or give NGOs legitimacy and a license to operate. In this sense, layered visibilities constitute the “contact zone” (Pratt, 1992) upon which postcolonial subjects encounter, reimagine, and reconstruct identities based on available discourses. To gain a richer knowledge concerning how postcoloniality, visibility discourses and technologies interact, we next introduce a communication centered view of postcolonialism that explains how the identities of the colonizers and colonized are created in liminal hybrid spaces through processes of mimicry and juxtaposition. As we show next, such perspective helps identifying how the agencies of discourses and technologies of visibility shape postcolonial identification in these settings.

Postcoloniality and global visibility discourses

Postcolonialism “offers different ways of understanding the world” (Broadfoot & Munshi, 2007, p. 254) that are typically replaced by Western-centric perspectives. In this vein, postcolonialism refers to the socio-political conditions and encounters that reproduce spaces of postcolonial dependencies and dominations (Alawattage & Fernando, 2017). An updated definition of postcolonialism from a
communication centered standpoint helps going beyond the conventional chronological connotation of the term as being the resistance to/aftermath of official colonialism, and to acknowledge the human and non-human agencies\(^2\) present when visibility discourses are mobilized. By cross-fertilizing postcolonialism and a communication perspective we can identify the thresholds, limits and potentialities of visibilities and related invisibilities when such global discourses are developed and implemented in postcolonial contexts. This articulation of postcolonialism in these conflicting senses\(^3\) makes the case for considering the postcolonial context: NGO workers tend towards both liberation from repression and toward desire for inclusion in global debates and discourses by means of visibility technologies (which in turn involve ever more occasions for repression, Chow, 2010).

Literature on visibility typically discusses global(ization) discourses and postcolonialism (Barrett, Cooper, & Jamal, 2005; Cooper & Ezzamel, 2013; Cruz et al., 2011) by examining how global visibility discourses are constructed, adapted and circulated, and what roles visibility technologies play in rendering discourses practical “at ‘local’ levels” (Cooper & Ezzamel, 2013, p. 288). Following Said (1975/2012), studies argue that global discourses involve more general subjugation, appropriation and colonialism, especially in the form of “conceptual intervention” (Cooper and Ezzamel 2013, p. 288) that constitutes a central element of globalization. In a similar approach, we make an extension to organizational communication literature on global visibility discourses by articulating how visibility technologies infuse the local with the global to create hybrid postcolonial identities. To this end, we argue that NGOs’ and their members’ identities are based on a collectively negotiated narrative (Vásquez, 2013; Vásquez & Cooren, 2011), in our case, a postcolonial one.

Postcolonial analyses typically draw on seminal postcolonial research spearheaded among others by Said (e.g., 1994, 2003), Fanon (e.g., 2001, 2008), Spivak (e.g., 1987, 1988), and Bhabha (e.g., 1994, 1995), who have all focused on the duality between the West's cultural domination and the locals’ resistance. For example, local discourses of visibility in the MENA region typically draw on Islamic theological concepts (“ghayb”: the unseen, invisible, unknown, and “shahada”: the witnessed, the seen, Bubandt, Rytter & Suhr, 2019). To understand this duality, concepts such as mixture, syncretism, mestizaje (Wade, 2016), meange, and creolization (Dash, 1992) are used to explain the (human) agency of those colonized to create “third
spaces” through intermingling the cultural systems of the colonizer and the colonized. Bhabha's (1995) theoretical framework is commonly used, discussed, and debated in this regard. Indeed, “third spaces” and “hybridity” (Bhabha, 1995) are conceptualizations that can help negate the cultural and institutional essentialism embedded in other approaches to studying the use and impact of visibility discourses. Nevertheless, postcolonial studies have primarily focused on the dual nature of local and global management practices and identities and neglected the hybridization process between these two and the agencies of non-human actors included in visibility practices. Such focus fails to explore the interplay between technologies of visibility, the “conscious, inter-subjective processes of reinterpretation and negotiations of the imported practices; and the less negotiable […] local schemes of cultural interpretation” (Yousfi, 2013, p. 395). In this respect, this paper addresses hybridization and its underlying processes (juxtaposition and mimicry, Bhabha, 1994) from a communication centered perspective to highlight not only human agency but also the agency of global visibility discourses and technologies for postcolonial identity processes.

Hybridity has frequently been used in postcolonial studies to mean simply cross-cultural ‘exchange’ (Chow, 2010). This use of the term has been widely criticized, since it usually implies negating and neglecting the imbalance and inequality of the power relations it references (Hanchey, 2018). By stressing the transformative cultural, linguistic and political impacts on both the colonized and the colonizer, ‘exchange’ has been regarded as replicating assimilationist policies by masking or ‘whitewashing’ cultural differences. Assertions of national culture and of pre-colonial traditions have of course played an important role in the development of anticolonial studies in organizational communication research and in arguing for an active decolonizing project (Cruz, 2015). Theories of the hybrid nature of postcolonialism are useful because these assert a different model for resistance. In this respect, we define hybridity as a process of resistance because by distorting the colonizer’s demands hybridity often thwarts the achievement of their intentions and objectives. In other words, hybridity “turns the [colonizing] West into a reasonable manageable vector within the traditional world-view” (Nandy, 1982, p. xiii) of the colonized. Hybridity can be understood through two interrelated communicative processes, juxtaposition and mimicry (Bhabha, 1994).
Firstly, juxtaposition amounts to the ways in which local NGOs juxtapose global visibility discourses and local practices to tell their own narratives, and in doing so they not only reconstruct their postcolonial identities but also implicitly undermine and subvert international NGOs’ authority (Yousfi, 2013). Global visibility discourses produced by international NGOs often amount to the application of technologies such as mechanisms and indexes purporting to be superior “models” for the developing countries (Neu & Gomez, 2006, p. 76). International NGOs’ identity is discursively constituted by such models as visible, efficient, technically-superior, non-corrupt, greener, and economically and socially responsible managerial personas (Banerjee, 2011; Banerjee & Prasalad, 2008). However, these ideal “models” are appropriated, resisted and localized through juxtaposing them with local ideologies and practices. Secondly, mimicry, concerns the deployment of visibility discourses and technologies by international NGOs as control mechanisms. Mimicry's dual strategy situates it between the synchrony (i.e., the demand for identity, stasis) and the counter pressure of diachrony (i.e., change, difference) and represents an ironic compromise (Bhabha, 1994). It is, on the one hand, an elusive and effective strategy of international NGOs to force local NGOs to emulate Western visibility models, which implies a “certain cultural convergence between the two and an effort to make the unfamiliar familiar” (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 85-86). On the other hand, it “emerges as the representation of a difference” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 86). Mimicry thus involves a double articulation: a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline to “appropriate” local NGOs, and a significant of inappropriateness, difference, or recalcitrance towards them. Mimicry in other words coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power intensifying surveillance but also poses an imminent threat to “normalized” knowledge by signifying difference (Prasalad & Prasalad, 2003). In postcolonial contexts, then, NGO members’ identities stem from the interplay between global visibility discourses, technologies and individuals’ practices of juxtaposition and mimicry. For a richer understanding of the distributed agency between human and non-human actors involved in these processes, this paper puts forward a framework that takes into account visibility’s performative and paradoxical aspects in postcolonial contexts.
International NGOs deploy global visibility discourses and technologies (see figure 1). When these translate locally, they constitute a third space where certain organizational realities and identities for both the colonized and the colonizer are created. This hybrid space emerging between the global and the local also functions as a resistance practice enacted by actors to produce responses to dominating global discourses of visibility and construct a third space of counter-hegemony constituting a “polyphony of voices, each of which constitutes its own irreducible discursive identity” (i.e., an agonistic social order, Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 191). Such a third space (Bhabha, 1995) is a “site in which the colonizer and colonized are offered new possibilities of identity creation [sic] in addition to new forms of political agency and subversion” (Yousfi, 2013, p. 396). A third-space metaphor conceives postcolonial encounters as spaces of contradiction and subtle disavowal of dominating visibility discourses. Constituted by such encounters of juxtaposition and mimicry, this third space is not entirely governed by the dispositions and rules of either the colonizer or the colonized but also by non-human agencies whose implications are little understood. The empirical analysis that follows after the methods section, add to extant research by showing that the hybridity so constructed belongs to neither the colonizer or the colonized but is a fusion of both and agency here is distributed among
both human and non-human actors. Our visibility framework is developed on an iterative process (Tracy, 2013), and we use fieldwork data to further refine our model with novel insights derived from the empirical data that were not included in the original conceptualization based on previous research.

Methods

Data Collection and Context

This study is part of a longitudinal multi-sited ethnography of an international NGO that took place during 2016-2018 in several locations across Morocco, Western Sahara, Tunisia, USA and Lebanon (for further methodological details see Author, 2019). For the purpose of this study, we focused on eight informants (five from a local NGOs and three from an international NGOs selected through the snowballing technique, see table 1 for affiliations of respondents) working in Morocco and Western Sahara provinces. The respondents were interviewed face-to-face based on semi-structured and unstructured interviews (lasting approx. 60 min) several times throughout the duration of the study in different locations in Morocco and abroad amounting to 22 hours of interview data.

To cross-compare global visibility discourses and their implications we selected a local and an international NGO. This is because international NGOs generally depend on an assumption that local populations cannot be trusted to fix their own problems (Neu & Gomez, 2002). This mindset is a legacy of colonization, using ‘soft power’ to construct indirect control through humanitarian aid and good will, rather than direct control through military or colonial occupation (Cobbs & Hoffman, 1998). International NGOs and other ostensible attempts to mitigate social and economic injustice in foreign countries ironically work to solve problems that are created and maintained by Western countries in the first place (Banerjee, 2011). However, the support of international NGOs is needed in Morocco because local NGOs face multiple difficulties from Moroccan authorities in conducting their work. The most common administrative maneuver to block registration consists of a local official refusing to accept a new NGOs founding documents or accepting these papers but refusing to issue the receipt, even though the law doesn’t give the official that option (report, NGO2). This
also occurs when a registered association notifies authorities, in compliance with the law, of changes in its executive body or bylaws. As a result, local NGOs that have not been registered operate in a legal limbo and under a range of constraints. They cannot file lawsuits or legally sponsor gatherings on public thoroughfares, and face barriers in renting office premises, opening a bank account, and participating in government-sponsored activities. In these circumstances the support and aid of international NGOs is essential for local NGOs. Thus, a study of the interplay between global visibility discourses and local practices is relevant for teasing out their implications and underlying processes.

**Data Sources and Analysis**

The broader questions that initially framed our data collection were: What are workers from international and local NGOs in Morocco trying to achieve by engaging in visibility practices? Where and how do they get the insight and inspiration for such engagement? How do they translate such insight and inspiration into a set of visibility practices addressing wider social needs in their local settings? How do they reimagine their collective identity, their managerial roles, and their human rights connections through such translations? To address these, we explored two data sources: (a) semi-structured and unstructured interviews with workers actively engaged in visibility activities (i.e., participating in the organizational processes of using visibility technologies); and (b) a content analysis of 115 pages of their textual outputs (i.e., mission reports, annual reports, metrics and website and social media content related to visibility). Data were analyzed using theoretical coding based on previous research. Data analysis and data collection were not separate phases, but took place concurrently and drove each other (Charmaz, 2006). We started with open coding in initial phases of analysis to consider a variety of explanations and understandings to answer the research questions. In the second round, we pursued theoretical coding based on topics that were identified in the literature but also relevant to participants (e.g., visibility discourses, surveillance, silencing, etc.). Using this method, we sought out specific types of data (like negative cases or additional confirmatory cases) to further enhance or confirm existing theory. We used an iterative approach to analyze both interview and field note data, using several rounds of coding and writing to gradually narrow and refine the themes we identified in the data (Tracy, 2013). We analyzed the textual data as well as the photos by cataloguing and categorizing material artifacts and embodied activities present in them. The emerging three themes are presented next.
Findings

Third spaces: The liminality between the global and the local visibility

The liminality created by the interplay between global and local visibility discourses is in a state of flux, remaking itself through various postcolonial encounters. In our cases, the local intersects with the global primarily through three main visibility technologies: press releases and reports of human rights violations to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights’ (ICCPR); metrics pertaining to ensuring quality and following global methodologies in reporting, and United Nations’ mechanisms. For our respondents, these visibility practices are constitutive of workers’ individual and collective subjectivities. It is through such interplay between global discourses and local interactions that organizational identities are constituted (cf. Chaput et al., 2008). For example, like many others we interviewed, a manager reveals the local NGO’s “commitment” in appropriating global visibility discourses and the ways in which [UN] mechanisms “help” collective action (“our work”), underlining their capacity to produce “results” and “make a difference”:

The goals of our reporting are to defend human rights and document the truth about grave human-rights violations that happen to political activists in Western Sahara. We aim to get attention on the international scene and from the press for the release of Sahrawi political prisoners and the right to compensation and physical rehabilitation for victims and relatives in accordance with international human-rights law and international jurisprudence. The UN mechanisms and their methodology help us do our work. We collaborate closely with rapporteurs to write our press releases and reports and then we share them with journalists and social media. Five years ago, we used to go to Geneva and just make statements to the media about the abuses in Western Sahara, but that did not have any effect. Then we committed to the ICCPR reporting, we relied on their specific mechanisms to document abuses, and we started to see results. Our international connections and the mechanisms made a difference in my release from prison after two years, where I was held without a trial. All rapporteurs and diplomats have been to my home. But still the efficiency of our networks and international contacts depends on
the context and their specific [political] interests in case (interview, respondent 2, emphasis added).

The UN Mechanisms are “making a difference” in that these have the capacity to create international pressure and contest the legitimacy of Moroccan authorities. This global visibility discourse is appropriated because the monarchy’s preoccupation with the way the international press constitutes the image of Morocco is “the only force that can give pause to the regime’s repressive tactics” (respondent 2, interview). The hybridization between the global and the local functions here as survival mechanism. The third liminal space emerges, as respondents indicate, because of its emphasis on negotiation and compromise, reflective of a pragmatic orientation specific to local NGO workers (Mikell, 1997). Workers move beyond the global visibility discourse to avoid its negative effects and navigate the local postcolonial situation characterized by challenging socio-economic conditions, including the lack of access to privacy and safety. Negotiating a situation in betwixt and between the global and the local advantageously can guarantee survival. Individuals continuously adapt their visibility practices (using social media, websites, smartphones, etc.) to avoid surveillance and the disruption of their work tasks by authorities, as the manager indicates:

We use our website and email to send reports and document [human rights] abuses. We do not use social media since we do not have the human resources and training. For dangerous issues we don’t use any technology, we speak face to face. We only put things on Facebook to be visible after the protests, like this one [shows photo on his smartphone’s Facebook application, see figure 2 below]. But during preparing our reports for the UN Mechanisms, we moved from using technology to no technology in order to avoid being tracked [by the police]. We only talk face to face, nothing on the phone or email when we coordinate. It wouldn’t have been safe for you to come to El Laayoune. You would have been immediately followed by the police. Last month I was with British representatives in my car, and we got stopped at a checkpoint and the police wanted to take one of the Brits their camera (interview, respondent 4, emphasis added)
The distributed agency of visibility discourses and technologies has dual implications. On the one hand, technologies of visibility are indispensable for workers’ efforts to fulfill their mission, that is to raise awareness about human rights violations in Morocco and Western Sahara. On the other hand, these introduce challenges in terms of surveillance, silencing and censorship when global and local visibility discourses are not “aligned” and clash with each other:

It was one year and a half ago that the problems started, when the ministry of interior declared that the discourse of these NGOs, including ours, is not aligned with that of the authorities. What they [the authorities] want is to take us out of the public and international space[s]. For instance, we cannot rent any big facility like a hotel or at a conference hall for any workshop to train our personnel on how to write reports based on UN mechanisms. Whenever we try this then that hotel receives a phone call to cancel our booking and to throw us out. The only places we can use is our premises here (our conference room which is rather small). That's all. Like this they are trying to keep us from spreading our message out in the public space (interview, respondent 2)

The negative consequences triggered by visibility practices are tangible. Surveillance is one of them: it is characterized by the systems of data collection and sharing international NGOs deploy that
inadvertently increase the vulnerability of its workers and the people in urgent need (Lanotero, 2019).

As the respondent from the local NGO alludes:

NGO4 [pseudonym] got me into prison [laughing] They told me ‘Ahmed come to Geneva speak about human rights, show how your organization is using [international] mechanisms in MENA. We want to promote best practices’. So, I went and then I started receiving threats, and then I when I returned home, I got into prison. It took them [NGO4] four months of campaigning to international contacts to get me out. Since then we have put digital security procedures into place so that we ensure secure communications, anonymity and the safety of our staff when they are working with these mechanisms (interview, respondent 5).

As an international NGO, NGO4’s survival depends on generating enough grassroots support from local NGOs such as those represented by respondent 5 that rely on technologies of visibility in their reporting. NGO4 does this to attract funding from international donors and legitimize their cause in the eyes of those who have the power to make the social change in which international NGOs are interested (Mynster & Edwards, 2014). Such discursive stance exemplifies the Western-centric assumptions infused in global visibility discourses across three different levels (Hanchey, 2018). First, on an international level, the power to make change is primarily conceptualized as economic. This is a Western capitalistic vision of change (Neu & Gomez, 2006). However, from a differing cultural perspective, the “power to make social change”—and thus, to resist—might instead stem from local and not international connections. Second, on the organizational level, the statement implies that the survival of the NGO is positive and desired. However, NGO4’s survival might only be desired from a Western perspective, and not from that of those being served. Third, following from the first point, since the comment describes an international NGO, non-Western people are not considered able to implement their own change. As we illustrate next, when local NGOs encounter global visibility discourses and their subsequent implications, hybridization – the process of resisting and distorting the colonizer’s visibility demands - takes place through communicative processes of juxtaposition and mimicry.

Juxtaposition
Local NGOs juxtapose global visibility discourses and local practices to tell their own narratives, and in doing so they not only reconstruct their postcolonial identities but also implicitly undermine and subvert the colonizer's cultural authority (Werbner, 2001). In this respect, local NGO workers are both agents and subjects of discourse whose choices of interacting and remaining outside of a discursive formation lie in their assessment of the postcolonial context (Cruz, 2018). As the respondent asserts in the following statement, at the first sight, technologies of visibility are rooted in a colonialist epistemology which local NGOs often take for granted (Attawage & al., 2007). However, international mechanisms and the like, are not simply the instruments through which international NGOs control the efficiency, imagination and aspirations of the colonized (Bhabha, 1994). Instead, technologies of visibility exhibit agency and create unintended effects such as exclusion and silencing (’being out of the loop’) when these are entangled with “realities on the ground”:

I’ve been forcefully disappeared 1-2 years, detained without any right 2 years and imprisoned without a trial for 2 years. So, I was driven by everything I endured when detained to setup our NGO and to fight back against injustice that happens to all our [activist] friends. Our reporting is based on the UN Mechanisms because it allows us to defend our rights based on the principles of international human-rights agreements. *It is true that most times we need to adapt our reporting to the realities on the ground. We simply couldn’t follow the strict guidelines because we did not have the resources to do so.* We have been blacklisted for 10 years despite that we applied every time for an authorization to function. *In all this time we had to use rather uncommon methods. Most of the times we would do peaceful demonstration and share them on Facebook after the ‘sit ins’* [shows image on smartphone, see figure 3 below]. But *these did not fit with the desired international [reporting] rules, so we were out of the loop.* Things have changed now, nine years after, the high court has ruled that the government had unlawfully impeded us from registering, so we finally have an authorization to function. So, we hope we can be heard again. *We reported about this on our website and also NGO4 wrote a report about us* (interview, respondent 1, emphasis added)
Figure 3. Visibility technologies used retroactively after a ‘sit in’ demonstration

Global visibility discourses promote managerial practices purporting to be superior economically and socially responsible ‘models’ for the rest of the world (Neu & Gomez, 2006). For example, under the headline “Globalising NGO4”, a discourse of decentralization was initiated in NGO4 which was discursively positioned under values such as “speed,” “empowerment” “accountability” and “relevance”:

Global Transition Programme (GTP) is our process of moving closer to the ground to ensure we have significantly greater impact by becoming a more global movement. By distributing our teams to 15 Regional Offices in key capitals we will be empowered to act with greater legitimacy, speed, capacity and relevance as we stand alongside those whose rights are violated, and join with others to build rights-respecting societies […] The reorganisation enables us to work in a more integrated, efficient and effective way across functions and across geographies as well as with greater accountability to our local partners (Secretary General Report, NGO4).

However, these ideal international “models” were not simply obeyed but rather contested for workers’ own appreciation, appropriation, and reimagining of their identities through juxtaposing them with local practices
of resistance (e.g., humor, cynicism). As the respondents 6 and 7 indicated during a team meeting, NGO4 did not take into account the possible negative repercussions global visibility discourses can generate when juxtaposed, such as surveillance and increased pressure on “local partners”, resulting in dis-identification:

Respondent 6: The GTP and the whole decentralization, visibility and accountability is a PR stunt. How can they expect that one person should be good at reading laws, drafting policy and then knowing all the encryption technology? All their [NGO4] technology and human rights [division] sits in London and will stay there. But with the decentralization we [policy and human rights officers] are now sent in these [local NGOs] offices like Beirut and Tunis and we do not have any digital security training and we are endangering our sources. For instance, I have a Facebook account I setup to talk with a contact on the ground [in Morocco]. And now I realize that it is endangering us both since that [coordinating on Facebook] is not safe, and the repercussions can be really scary.

Respondent 7: You know when I got here last month, I discovered that there was virtually no digital security in place. Sensitive information was being stored on insecure devices with no information back-up, no encryption, no secure communication channels and no use of pseudonyms. So, we take whatever comes from NGO4 with a grain of salt. There is double pressure on us, and we need to work harder and with our own resources since they cut any other help. We have to make sure that everyone is safe and then feed to the head office what they want to hear (respondent 6, 7, fieldnote, team meeting, emphasis added)

While being driven by global visibility discourses, a “consultation process” (Secretary General Report, NGO4) was performed once the decentralization process begun. Yet the GTP was driven by organizational survival, which often takes primacy in international aid work, to the point where the mission of the NGO became more centrally about keeping the organization going than about doing the work the NGO is supposed to be doing in postcolonial settings (see also Dichter, 2003). As indicated next by a respondent in a staff report, workers implicitly undermined and subverted NGOs’ authority when they juxtaposed visibility discourses:
Most staff still appear to agree with the [visibility] values that drove the GTP process. However, many staff also feel that consultation was essentially a “tick box exercise,” that their input was not taken into serious consideration, that many changes were rushed, and that communication failures exacerbated and added to pre-existing issues and tensions […] Frankly, the Secretary General at the time, with support from the international board, pushed forward moving closer to the ground [GTP], at any cost and in a very dogmatic manner. They were insistent on doing it one way and one way only. It was made clear it was going to happen one way or another, and staff wellbeing was not a priority (report, NGO4)

Mimicry
In our cases, global colonial discourses of visibility seem to essentially aim to produce compliant subjects who reproduce assumptions, habits and values – that is, ‘mimic’ international NGOs. Yet, visibility discourses produce instead ambivalent subjects whose mimicry is never very far from mockery (cf., Bhabha, 1994). Ambivalence describes this fluctuating relationship between mimicry and mockery, an ambivalence that is fundamentally unsettling to colonial dominance (Young, 1995). As the respondent indicates, workers oscillated between mimicry and mockery, resisting and challenging the claims of superiority of the global visibility discourse due to the ambivalent situation (‘all for show’) that disrupts its assumption of monolithic power:

We did our annual MENA retreat in New York, we talked a lot about our visibility, integrity, methodology and wellbeing of workers. At the security training we didn’t learn how to shoot a gun, as our policy is not carrying any guns, but we were shot at. They took us in a field, and shot at us with blank bullets, and we had to take cover. Also, they simulated a kidnapping and interrogation. We were on the road in a van a group of people and we were stopped by people who we never seen before and interrogated. They pulled us, pushed us and yelled at us. They kept gesticulating, pulling our shirts up and pushing our heads up the walls. It [the exercise] gives you quite a good experience on how to react especially in a group as we were playing the group. They told me that the other two people said this about you, so you either confess or get
shot. It [the exercise] does give you a good experience because you know, what you read in a book about how to behave has nothing to do with what’s happening in the field when you gather data for reporting. But then I went to Libya, and I did all the pre and post mission reports following the methodology and mechanisms. I mean you do a pre-memo before the mission and then you do a post-memo after the mission and you can mention there if you have any issues with stress, etc. And then I realized it’s all for show, nobody really listens if you are overworked or deal with high stress as you go over your limits to fulfill all reporting criteria and stick to the methodology. So, you get disillusioned when H[ead]Q[uarters] says one and does another, but you push through when you care about changing the situation on the ground. Even though you know were bombs are exploding, where the rebels are, so on. I was still under a lot of stress. It is true that our security managers (which are former military officers) usually take care of safety yet I stayed in a hotel, so there was a risk (interview, respondent 8, emphasis added)

Mimicry thus involves a double articulation: a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline to “appropriate” local NGOs; and a significant of inappropriateness, difference, or recalcitrance. Importantly, as the respondent indicates above, mimicry coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, but visibility technologies (pre- and post- mission reports, fix criteria, etc.) have agency and act to intensify surveillance posing an imminent threat to “normalized” knowledge of international NGOs. Postcolonial encounters take place through visibility discourses and technologies which are active agents for identifying mis- or dis-identifying with specific organizational identities. For NGO workers, global visibility becomes a discursive and technological disciplining resource that actively reconstructs their postcolonial identities through discursive and material means.

In short, in our cases juxtaposition and mimicry are communicative processes at the basis of hybridization, an ambivalent form of resistance to global visibility discourses. Hybridization happens because visibility operates within a colonizing framework of global standardization that limits possibilities of visibility to address critical socio-cultural, political, and environmental issues (Alawattage & Fernando, 2017). For instance, a respondent shared a view common across all NGO workers, when reflecting on the
difficulties encountered when engaging with global visibility discourses. These amounted to censorship, silence and exclusion:

You hear them [Moroccan institutions] talking now about reforms, aiding minorities, efficiency, etc. which was unheard of in 2008 for instance. But still change is difficult because as an NGO be it local or international you don’t have the same power. You cannot change the law. But what can you do is advocacy, like this we both, local and international NGOs start pressuring with reports, mechanisms, here and there, and the government must take action. This often happens if there is a big international media debate about something. But most of the times, *international NGOs have their own agenda* as well and then *things are getting a bit more difficult*. We once organized a press release with the report and at the reception we met the French ambassador and his aid. They both had printed the report and it was full red lines. The aid came to me and said: ‘this is not correct, this is not correct, and this is not correct.’ I should have asked him ‘but are you Moroccan’? *Plus ça change [plus c'est la même chose,* fr. lit. the more it changes, the more it's the same thing] You know, royals and former [colonial] powers often share the same view (interview, respondent 1, fieldnote).

**Conclusion**

This paper has examined the implications of global visibility discourses and technologies in postcolonial country contexts. Theoretically, the paper cross-fertilized a communication lens with postcolonial one as such approach brings the postcolonial context alongside agency and discourse to assess how NGO workers communicatively navigate visibility in postcolonial settings. The paper used ethnographic methods and a multiple case study to identify the agencies of global visibility discourses and technologies in a postcolonial country context (Morocco) when these are employed by international NGOs and encountered by local ones. Based on its findings, the contribution of the paper is twofold. Firstly, that we show that visibility discourses constitute a third space where certain organizational realities and identities for both the colonized and the colonizer are created. This hybrid space emerging between the global and the local also functions as a
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resistance practice (through juxtaposition and mimicry) to dominating global discourses of visibility. Such space is not entirely governed by the dispositions and rules of either the colonizer or the colonized but also by different agencies of both human and non-human actors (UN mechanisms, GTP discourses, reports, etc). Secondly, the findings show that international NGOs are themselves thoroughly steeped in capitalist logics and motivations, no matter how hard they may seek to rid themselves of such aspects (Dempsey & Sanders, 2010). The findings show that despite its appeal, the global discursive system of visibility surrounding NGOs can have negative consequences in terms of surveillance, exclusion and silencing. Future research is therefore needed to explore further ways to circumvent such side effects in postcolonial settings and perhaps change global visibility discourses towards sustainable outcomes. This is important since most current theory on the nonprofit sector is economic in nature, which accepts the market economy without question and “assum[es] human behavior is primarily about consuming goods and services and acquiring resources” (Koschmann, 2012, p. 140).
Notes

1. informant quote, pseudonyms are used to protect respondents’ and their organizations’ identities.

2. By focusing on the agency of visibility practices we decenter traditional analyses of human interactions by highlighting the agentic role of texts, technologies and metrics that produce visibility. Drawing on actor network theory (Latour, 1996), the notion of non-human agency means to recognize that artifacts share their ability to make a difference with other artifacts (metrics, mechanisms, reports, digital media, etc.) just like human agents do (Vásquez & Cooren, 2011). The idea of non-human agency does not mean that humans are deprived of agency but rather that visibility practices act for, with, against and through human beings, just like human beings act for with and through texts (Vásquez & Cooren, 2011).

3. Our intention is not to affirm the common view that postcolonialism revisits the colonial past in order to retrieve its impositions and exactions, its erasures and suppressions (Hanchey, 2018). Rather when we discuss the condition of postcolonialism and its intersections with visibilities we refer to a ‘colonial present’ as a sign of theoretical resistance to the mystifying amnesia of the colonial aftermath. A communication centered stance on postcolonialism questions not when it begins and ends, but where it is located and who or what agencies are making it possible. This makes postcolonialism and organizational communication suitable theoretical frameworks to cross-fertilize for examining visibility research because postcolonialism exists, inter alia, in textual spaces where postcolonial antagonisms, contradictions, and resistances occur.
Table 1. Respondents and Affiliation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender, Age</th>
<th>NGO</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 1, Male 41</td>
<td>Local NGO</td>
<td>Rabat, Morocco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 2, Male, 42</td>
<td>International NGO</td>
<td>Rabat, Morocco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 3, Male 39</td>
<td>Local NGO</td>
<td>Sidi Ifni, Morocco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 4, Male 41</td>
<td>Local NGO</td>
<td>Sidi Ifni, Morocco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 5, Male 28</td>
<td>International NGO</td>
<td>Rabat, Morocco, currently on asylum in France</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 6, Female, 27</td>
<td>Local NGO</td>
<td>Rabat, Morocco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 7, Male 52</td>
<td>Local NGO</td>
<td>El Laayoune, Western Sahara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 8, Female, 29</td>
<td>International NGO</td>
<td>Rabat, Morocco</td>
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