

# MOROCCAN FACEBOOKERS AND THE VISUAL RETHORIC OF POLITICAL NEGATION

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## **ABSTRACT:**

This paper attempts to unravel the underlying dialectics of subversion that gives rise to a counter-hegemonic political consciousness in Moroccan Facebookers' visual narratives (notably, cartoons and image-macros) about Moroccan politics. It argues that these cartoons and image-macros construct and articulate a rhetorically counter-hegemonic discourse of political negation through generating ideographs that, in turn, animate a variety of antagonisms dismantling the state's discourse (the public transcript). I will base my analysis on the assumption that the emergence of a political counter-hegemony basically translates an actual change in reality wherein stronger changes in political discourse are constantly sustained and fostered. In this sense, the visual rhetoric of political negation offers itself as a pertinent framework that better explains and accounts for the discursive and non-discursive strategies of the counter-hegemonic discourse fostered by the visual narratives in this paper. For this purpose, I will particularly resort to this theoretical construct because it retains the power to encompass and synthesize the theoretical insights provided by major theorists such as Calvin McGee (1980), Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985), James Scott (1990), and Kevin Michael Deluca (1999). As such, I shall exercise and operate four concepts to investigate the visual narratives in concern: the notions of infra-politics, articulation, antagonism, and ideograph. Initially, I proceed by providing a brief overview of different networked uses and practices displayed by most of Moroccan Facebookers, then I conceptually locate these visual narratives within the theories of transgression, and, finally, I delineate some stronger instances of this Moroccan counter-hegemonic political consciousness.

## **Preliminary Communication**

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Moroccan Facebookers, visual narratives, comics, cartoons, political negation, transgression

## **Introduction**

Most Moroccan Facebookers do demonstrate a measure of critical reflexivity. The intense grassroots' manipulation of popular events, mainstream images, commercial ads, TV series, and home-made videos is but a strong testimony of

this critical reflexivity displayed by these Moroccan Facebookers. Their creative forms, practices, and uses are part and parcel of their daily networked experiences. Moroccan Facebookers are highly active on social networking websites. Massive numbers of active Moroccans have personal profiles on Facebook, produce or consume different videos on YouTube, and have even started to interact on Twitter<sup>1</sup>. Within these online spaces, they continuously appear to generate, post, and circulate plenty of online content. Its intensity and quality attests to the assumption that Moroccan youth are highly engaged with national as well as global issues. They are deeply attached to most of the issues, debates, and controversies relevant to their local, national and even global contexts. On a daily basis, they comment, debate, post, and circulate images, cartoons, videos, and hyperlinks. Most of these appear to be widely laden with revealing and insightful symbolic and performative cues. Oftentimes, the online content circulated within the variety of Moroccan Facebook groups reveals that there are signs of online discursive and aesthetic practices that are indicative of the depths of Moroccan Facebookers' intellectual and critical prospects. They show that their interventions and articulations rigorously contribute to enhancing a number of discursive and aesthetic forms, which, in turn, attest to the presence of online oppositional discourses, subversive symbols, and even minor public spheres. More importantly, they could be taken to represent a singular form of civic and political engagement conditioned by these Moroccan Facebookers' aspirations and desires.

Interestingly, within Moroccan Facebook spaces huge numbers of Moroccan Facebookers seem to cherish the tendency to express themselves visually in engaging with various sociocultural and political controversies inflicting Morocco. They post and share visuals of versatile content and form; some of these would occasionally bear on the private lives of these young people, while others would often reflect an acute sensitivity to the general public matters of the nation, all in such funny and amusing ways.

Putting this tendency into perspective, it is justified to describe these online users, borrowing Nicholas Mirzoeff's (2002) term, as "visual subjects"<sup>2</sup> (p. 10). Since they widely tend to audio-visually express themselves to engage with a variety of

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<sup>1</sup> The 2015 annual report of ANRT, Agence Nationale de Réglementation des Telecommunications (The National Agency for Telecommunications Regulation) estimated that Moroccan online users have reached 14,5 million users and that the rate increase had reached 45 % in 2015. It reported that the number of Moroccan Internet users had multiplied during the recent couple of years. Interestingly, the report provided detailed information on the use of social networks in Morocco. It stated that 2 out of 3 Moroccan persons have got access to social networks on a daily basis and that Moroccans aged between 15 and 29 had had access to these rigorously. For further information, see *AL Jarida Rasmiya*, October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016, 6505. For further information, see [https://www.anrt.ma/sites/default/files/rapportannuel/rapport\\_annuel\\_anrt\\_2015\\_vf.pdf](https://www.anrt.ma/sites/default/files/rapportannuel/rapport_annuel_anrt_2015_vf.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> By the visual subject, Mirzoeff (2002) means "the person who is both constituted as an agent of sight and as the effect of a series of categories of visual subjectivity" (p. 10).

sociocultural issues of concern, Moroccan Facebookers, in this sense, demonstrate an online agency that is audio-visually grounded and, particularly, reflected in the production of various image-macros<sup>3</sup>, comics, cartoons, and videos articulating their perceptions and viewpoints. They capitalize on the importance of the visual in producing meanings, sustaining viewpoints, dismantling counter ideologies, and laying bare power relationships.

Thus, Moroccan Facebookers are fundamentally visual subjects, for they unceasingly draw on their imaginative repertoires, cultural legacies, and daily experiences to flood online Moroccan spaces with visually important artifacts that, in the words of Rogoff, retain multi-layered and free signifiers, remake the world in the shape of these young individuals' fantasies and desires, or that narrate the stories which they carry within themselves (2002, p. 26). In this regard, Moroccan Facebookers' stronger inclination to engage with the visual message can be conceived as communicating a need to provide a visual rewriting of Moroccan culture, one that exists at the intersection of both objectivity and subjectivity and serves to translate their concerns, mirror their aspirations as well as to animate their life journeys.

Similarly, it should be stressed out at the outset that this paper primarily focused on the visual forms within Moroccan Facebook spaces more than the age, identity, gender, or educational background of their creators. Such visual forms were public and accessible to everyone with a Facebook account. It should also be stated that these were mostly the work of Moroccan anonymous individual subjects and collective groups and thus bore no institutional or organizational traces. Interestingly, these visual forms went viral, stirred comments, and accumulated huge numbers of likes, shares, postings, and re-postings in many online spaces. One cartoon, for instance, taken at random would have 300 shares within one Facebook group, but in other Facebook groups it would have this number multiplied, let alone other shares within Facebookers' personal profiles. As such, it was difficult to specify the exact number of online reactions each visual form had triggered at the time. Moreover, the time-frame of the production and circulation of the visual narratives was believed to be highly significant (notably from 2011 up to 2017) because of its unique historical context. The period reflected the aftermath of the controversial Arab Spring in many Arab countries, especially the tremendous flocking to social media websites by the ever-growing populations of Arabs in the Middle East and North Africa. Nationally, it reflected the increasing grassroots tendencies to engage with issues of public matter often in open and defying ways to the state or social conformity norms. For the scope of this paper, however, three exemplary visual narratives were chosen here, being related with each other not chronologically but thematically.

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<sup>3</sup> An image macro is basically an image onto which a text has been added. Patrick Davidson (2012) defines it as "a set of stylistic rules for adding text to images" (p. 127).

## 1. Politics of Transgression and Rhetoric of Negation

In this respect, the concept of “infra-politics”<sup>4</sup> or, the logic of negation, refers to the political practices adopted by subordinate groups under conditions of domination. By infra-politics, Scott (1990) refers to the “politics of disguise which takes place in public view but has a double meaning or is designed to shield the identity of the actor” (p. 19). It consists of a variety of “low profile practices of resistance ranging from gossips, folk tales, songs, to jokes, rituals, codes, and euphemisms” (Scott, 1990, p. 19) as well as satire, sarcasm, irony, metonymy, and malapropism. Similarly, Laclau and Mouffe’s articulatory theory gives us an insight into how hegemonic discourses are constructed and introduced as taken-for-granted, unquestioned social or political systems. In this regard, articulation refers to the practices that attempt “to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, [or] to construct a centre” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 112). On the contrary, antagonisms offer themselves as the counterpart of articulation. As Deluca (1999) explains, they “make possible the questioning, disarticulating, and re-articulating of a hegemonic discourse” (p. 40). McGee’s (2009) concept of “ideograph” comes to emphasize and to contextualize Laclau and Mouffe’s articulatory theory. By ideographs, McGee (1980) refers to ordinary language terms, signs, or symbols found in political discourse that warrant the use of power, excuse or guide behavior or belief, and define practices as acceptable. Given this framework, I shall constantly seek to identify and unravel the dynamics of the political negation enhanced in the visual narratives of this section. I shall define the elements and aspects of this rhetoric of negation, thus explaining how the counter-hegemonic discourse (the hidden transcript<sup>5</sup>) is articulated through generating ideographs that, in turn, animate a variety of antagonisms dismantling the state’s discourse (the public transcript).

## 2. Analysis of Moroccan Facebook Visual Narratives about Corruption

To begin with, *Fighting Corruption* (see Fig. 1) and *Reconciling with the Corrupt* (see Fig. 2) stage a fierce critique of the present government because it fails to abolish aspects of political, economic, and social corruption in the Moroccan society. In particular, they satirize the government’s policy of reconciling with corruption by bringing to the fore two paradoxes.

In *Fighting Corruption* (see Fig. 1), the cartoon portrays the government as entangled in an unequal struggle with corruption. The government is personified in the form of a thinner middle-aged man dressed in a grey suit, holding a bigger baseball stick and trying to beat the corrupt in vain because the latter is stronger and harder to reach. Ironically, the hit affects only the ordinary citizen. The corrupt

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<sup>4</sup> Infrapolitics refers here to the subversive ways and practices used by the dominated groups in the society.

<sup>5</sup> This concept refers to the discourse of the dominated groups in the society.

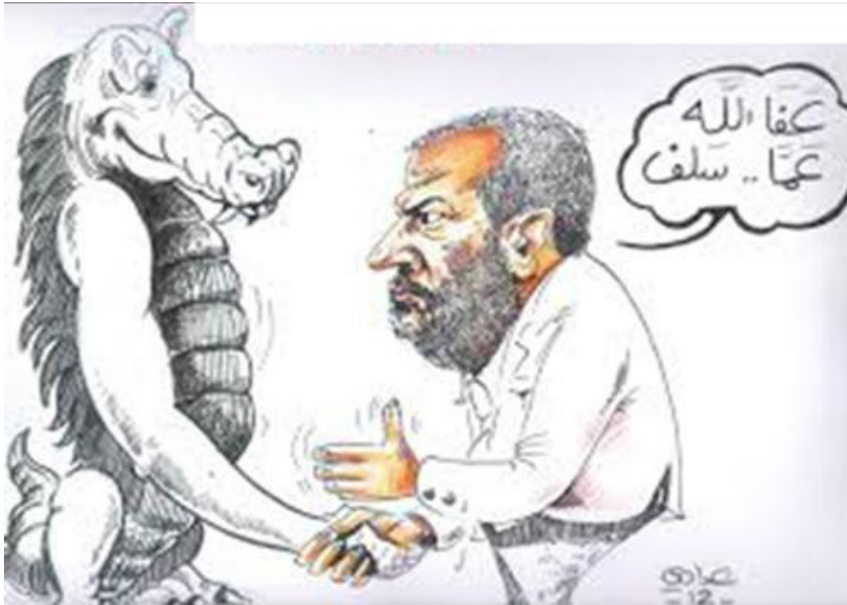


**Figure 1.** *Fighting Corruption.*  
**Source:** <https://www.benimellal-online.com/?p=11047>

citizen is featured in a dark blue suit with black sunglasses and a Cuban cigar in allusion to his power. Remarkably, the contrast of the represented participants' facial expressions emphasizes and intensifies the emotions in display. Unlike the extremely contorted and painful look of the ordinary man, the corrupt man shows a cunning and mocking smile. The representation suggests that the government's measures have only resulted in reverse effects. Therefore, the contrasted facial expressions of the ordinary citizen and the corrupt man better condense and substantiate the government's failure to put an end to corruption. Rather, they immensely shed light on the victimization from which the ordinary citizen suffers, and by extension, the disproportionately heavy cost Moroccan citizens have to pay as a result of these reverse effects.

Conversely, *Reconciling with the Corrupt* (see Fig. 2) displays another controversy of the government's policies. It claims that the government has reconciled with corruption, and thus, suggests that justice is suspended. The cartoon represents the figure of Mr. Benkirane, The Prime Minister, shaking hands with a predator<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The incorporation of the alligator here echoes the Moroccan Prime Minister's insinuating and evocative political language. Mr. Benkirane often refers to the corrupt citizens as alligators and ghosts in reference to what he claims to be their intriguing power to oppose change in Morocco.



**Figure 2.** *Reconciling with the Corrupt.*  
**Source:** <https://azilalalhora.com/news4932.html>

in allusion to corrupt Moroccan politicians and businessmen. In particular, the Prime Minister’s controversial statement<sup>7</sup> that “the government will never sue the corrupt officials and businessmen found guilty in Morocco”<sup>8</sup> is heavily satirized here. Hence, the representation reflects what it considers to be as a failing aspect of the socioeconomic policies of the present government in two different yet compatible scenes.

Interrogating their compositional construction, *Fighting Corruption* is constructed in the form of a transactional structure in which the government represents the actor while the impoverished ordinary citizen is represented as the goal. The action is enacted by the vectorial movement of the baseball stick. Clearly, this visual structure conveys the misery of ordinary citizens as they are negatively affected by the government’s decisions (they are literally bitten by the government). It stresses the idea that the governmental measures to abolish aspects of societal corruption have rather missed their target and only complicated the social situation of ordinary citizens. In addition, exaggeration plays an important role in the representation. By way of amplifying the physical composure of the corrupt man to the extent to which it becomes extremely difficult to beat him, the cartoon

<sup>7</sup> For further information on this controversy, see Hespres 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2012, <https://www.hespres.com/politique/59631.html>

<sup>8</sup> Mr. Benkiran’s quotation of the Quranic verse “*affa laho ama salaf*” brings us back to the controversy he raised as the result of his decision not to bring to justice the corrupt officials and businessmen, provided that they transfer back their money to the national banks and keep their business projects in the country.

emphasizes that corruption is deeply rooted in the society, thereby affecting the effectiveness of the government's policies. While the first cartoon retains indirect criticism of the present government, *Reconciling with the Corrupt* nonetheless levels a direct accusation at the latter. For this reason, it is rendered in the form of a visual offer because both of the figures are presented to the viewer for analysis and contemplation. It presents an overwhelming irony defeating logic as the government reconciles with the corruption in Morocco.

As regards its infra-political strategy, *Fighting Corruption* incorporates satire as its major rhetorical trope, but it also deploys other forms to negate the discourse of the government on the issue of corruption. On the one hand, situational irony constructs the first scene. The irony unfolds as the viewer becomes aware that ordinary citizens are rather the affected part of the government's measures to fight corruption. On the other hand, the second scene incorporates juxtaposition to create tension in the representation. The viewer's expectations are highly reversed because the Prime Minister reconciles with the corrupt: they then stand on an equal footing. Therefore, situational irony, personification, allusion and analogy substantiate the visual narrative's rhetorical arguments. They powerfully dismantle the government's public transcript, claiming that several measures have been taken to reduce the rates of corruption in a number of sectors in the state. The hidden transcript, constructed then in this visual narrative deems the government's policies as a failure<sup>9</sup>. Examining their ideographic articulation, both of the scenes construct the government as a complicit in sustaining corruption in the community. They deconstruct the discourse of the present government on taking efforts to abolish corruption in many state quarters. Through highlighting the statement, *Affa laho ama salaf*, as a discursive token epitomizing the government's discourse, the scenes antagonize this discourse. In so much as they disarticulate the foundational ideograph advanced by the government (that is, it fights the corruption in the country), the scenes indeed articulate the same ideograph anew: they construct the present government as actually embracing corruption and morally justifying its epidemic spread in the society. Therefore, the present government's hegemonic discourse on bringing the socioeconomic aspects of corruption to an end is considerably disarticulated here; its synchronic cluster of ideographs collapses and gives way to the one re-articulated by the representation. In parallel, *Forsaken Promises* (see Fig. 3) formulates its hidden transcript by way of deploying the rhetorical forms of "mock encomium" (praise intended to blame) and malapropism<sup>10</sup>. It negates the official "public transcript" through amplifying "the legacies" of Mr. Benkiran's government.

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<sup>9</sup> The figure maps onto the reports and studies proclaimed by a number of civil associations and organizations in Morocco. For further information, see the 2012 annual report of Moroccan Transparency (Hespress, 4<sup>th</sup> November 2013, <http://www.hespress.com/orbites/93535.html>).

<sup>10</sup> Mel Helizter defines malapropism as "the misuse of a word to humorous effect" (p. 63).

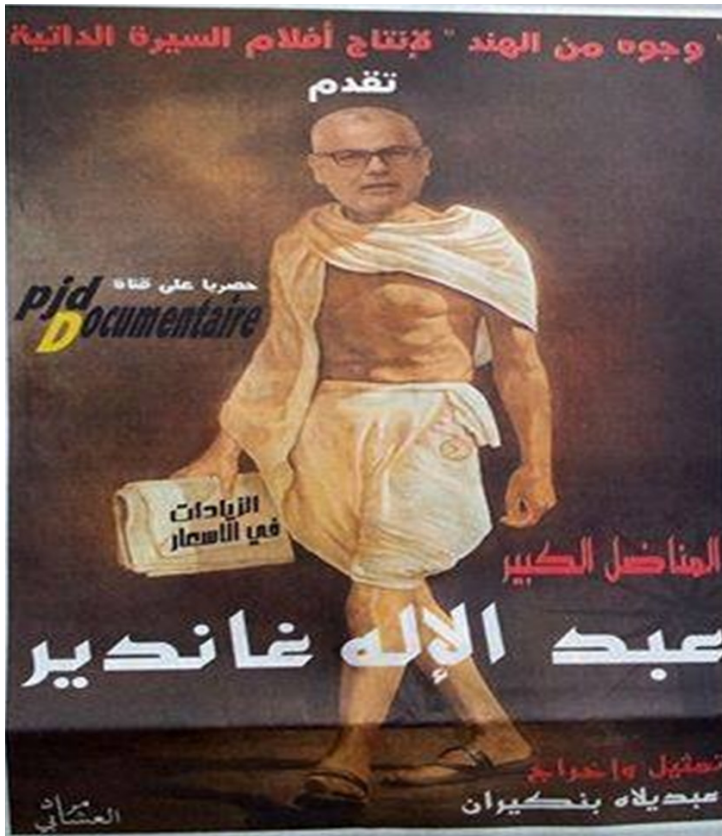


Figure 3. Forsaken Promises.

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/Bob-marli-211269582632034/photos/223807388044920>

This figure introduces Mr. Benkirane wearing the traditional garment of the Indian legendary figure Mahatma Gandhi<sup>11</sup> but holding papers onto which is inscribed “going up prices”. The featuring of the Prime Minister is rendered in the fashion of a film poster that claims the “legacies” of Mr. Benkirane. Words such as “the great”, “exclusive” and “gifts” all praise the Prime Minister. They inculcate the poster with a praising tone. In addition, the intelligent wordplay with the surname Gandhi by rendering it into *ghandir*, meaning “I will...” establishes the association between Mr. Benkirane and Mahatma Gandhi. It strikes an analogy between the two figures though the aim is not to emphasize the similarities. It is rather meant for mocking and blaming the Moroccan Prime Minister. The Moroccan Arabic word *ghandir*,

<sup>11</sup> Mahatma Gandhi was famous for his modest garment, dhoti and shawl. On 22th September 1921, he decided to wear this modest garment to identify with, show his support of, and defend the cause of the majority of poor Indian people. Concerning this decision, Gandhi once stated: “All the alterations I have made in my course of life have been effected by momentous occasions; and they have been made after such a deep deliberation that I have hardly had to regret them. And I did them, as I could not help doing them. Such a radical alteration — in my dress, — I effected in Madura.” For further information, see <https://pibindia.wordpress.com/2016/09/16/what-made-gandhiji-wear-only-loincloth-or-dhoti>.

notably the verbal suffix “ir” of the future form and use, conjures up feelings of frustration as it is often wedded to unfulfilled political promises. As a word often associated with Moroccan politicians, it becomes then evocative of their dishonesty. As such, the word *ghandir* exposes the government’s failure to bring about positive changes in the lives of Moroccans. Moreover, the cartoon is rendered in the form of an analytical process in which Mr. Benkirane stands as the carrier, whereas his humble clothes and papers represent his symbolic attributes. The visual process here serves to remind the viewer of the dishonesty and the cunningness of the Prime Minister, whereby it becomes impossible to compare him to Gandhi. The papers emphasize why it is impossible to make such a comparison. For Gandhi, it seems that his acts always contained endless wisdom for his followers; whereas, for Mr. Benkirane, the papers contain more taxes and unpopular official decisions. Therefore, the praising tone in the visual narrative masks the blame and condemnation of the present government. It satirically points to the “curses” rather than “the legacies” of the PJD-led government. As such, “mock encomium”, analogy, and malapropism constitute the major rhetorical tropes of this visual narrative. They formulate and consolidate its hidden transcript.

In fact, the poster disarticulates the present government’s discourse on social welfare. It dismantles the foundational ideographs sustaining this discourse. The government’s field of discursivity consisting of promises, annual reports on rates of economic growth, and social programs comes to be deconstructed. Instead, the ideographic articulation of the poster earnestly antagonizes this discourse. Ideographs such as *ziyada fi daraeib* (raising taxes) and *ghandir* (I will do...) mobilize a new synchronic cluster of signs that exposes the fallacy of the present government. It is an articulation that relegates back and equates the government’s discourse with the very oppressing economic system it purports to fight.

## Conclusion

This paper has engaged with the underlying dialectics of subversion giving rise to a counter-hegemonic political consciousness in Moroccan Facebookers’ visual narratives about Moroccan politics. It has argued that these visual narratives construct and articulate a rhetorically counter-hegemonic discourse of political negation through generating ideographs and animating a variety of antagonisms which dismantle the state’s discourse (the public transcript). Putting it in perspective, the paper responds and opens up the field to the emerging academic attempts at investigating the networked public sphere, notably through casting light on Morocco as a North African country that is highly enmeshed in the global issues of young online users, new media practices, and cultural transformation. Taking cue from Stoney Shami (2009), it seeks to “make the region and its publics visible in ways that do not focus on violence and exceptionalism from democratic ideals” (p. 15).

Perceived in this light, the paper points to the scholarly discussion and reflects critically at the diverse ways attention is sustained to the everyday construction of the Moroccan networked public sphere, primarily from the perspective of Moroccan Facebookers; a construction that pulls together and dilutes various socio-cultural and political aspects and elements accumulating into singular moments of critical reflexivity, cultural creativity, and technological adeptness. Equally so, it shifts focus on the importance of individual and collective agency in the Moroccan networked public sphere by locating the rich visual media content (its new visual forms, uses, and practices) created by Moroccan Facebookers and invested in cultural sensibilities like irony, satire, black humor, and paradox. Finally, and most important maybe, the paper contributes to academic efforts at mapping, what Shami (2009) calls, “the processual understanding of democratizing” Moroccan society (p. 17).

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# MAROKANSKI KORISNICI FEJSBUKA I VIZUELNA RETORIKA POLITIČKE NEGACIJE

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## **APSTRAKT:**

Ovaj rad pokušava razotkriti dijalektiku subverzije koja stoji u osnovi kontrahegemonističke političke svijesti karakteristične za vizuelne narative (a naročito karikatura i makro slike) marokanskih korisnika Fejsbuka o marokanskoj politici. Tvrdi se da te karikature i makro slike konstruišu i artikulišu retorički kontrahegemonistički diskurs političke negacije pri tom generišući ideografe, koji, zauzvrat, pokreću različite antagonizme demontirajući državni diskurs (javni transkript). Analiza pomenutih vizuelnih formi je zasnovana na pretpostavci da pojava onlajn političke kontrahegemonije u osnovi predstavlja stvarnu promjenu u društvenoj stvarnosti, pri čemu se na nju stalno održavaju snažnije promene u političkom diskursu. U tom smislu, vizuelna retorika političke negacije nudi se kao odgovarajući interpretativni okvir za razumijevanje diskurzivnih i nediskurzivnih strategija kontrahegemonističkih tendencija u pomenutim formama vizuelnih narativa. Autor se služi pomenutom teorijskom koncepcijom jer ona zadržava moć da obuhvati i sintetizuje uvide velikih teoretičara kao što su Mekgi (1980), Laklau i Muf (1985), Skot (1990), i Deluka (1999). Po tom osnovu, za potrebe istraživanja o pomenutim vizuelnim narativima autor će operacionalizovati četiri pojma: infra-politike, artikulacije, antagonizma i ideografa. U tom kontekstu, autor na početku rada daje kratak pregled različitih internetskih praksi koje primjenjuje većina marokanskih korisnika Fejsbuka, a zatim konceptualno locira pomenute vizuelne narative unutar teorija o transgresiji, i, na kraju, opisuje i analizira specifične primjere marokanske kontrahegemonističke političke svesti.

## **Ključne riječi:**

marokanski korisnici Fejsbuka, vizuelni narativi, stripovi, karikature, politička negacija, transgresija