



Dead Sea Scrolling

When a band of new media types from the United States and the Arab world gathered at the lowest point of earth—1800 feet below sea level on the Jordan side of the Dead Sea—their discourse was sometimes salty and decidedly buoyant.

The fifth in an ongoing series of Arab-U.S. editors' dialogues, this one focused exclusively on the impact of new media in spanning the cultural and informational divides between the Arab and American media worlds, and in dissolving the harmful stereotyping in which both worlds so readily engage.



Umm Faleh, a 90-year old shepherd of Jordan's Azamat tribe, gains literacy through the computer as the Arab world broadly embraces new media and fresh social activism.

Arab-American commentator Rami Khouri makes the point that the information war is the only one in which the Arab world, with the explosion of satellite television and its offshoots, has “fought the Americans to a draw.”

Draw or not, the dialogue has been joined to foster cooperation, not heighten competition. Entitled “The New Media Environment: Paths to Understanding,” the 2008 forum focused primarily on state-of-the-art new media and the opportunities for increased understanding and cultural empathy they provide.

INFORMATION FLOWS: SPEAKING IN TONGUES WHILE SEEDING SOCIAL NETWORKING

By Crocker Snow Jr.

The lifespan of new media as an essential news source in the U.S. and Arab worlds respectively can be measured on the fingers of two hands. New media has dominated for approximately ten years in the United States and about half that in the Arab world. Little enough time to draw conclusions about the socializing effects of new media, about best and worst practice or even the dangers due to their capacity to offer narrow perspectives on the one hand or irresponsible unaccountability on the other.

Yet 5–10 years is more than sufficient to take revealing exit polls and count the early returns.

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ARAB WORLD'S NEW MEDIA WINDFALL: SWEET FOR USERS, SOUR FOR GOVERNMENTS

By Daoud Kuttab

New media opportunities have been a godsend to creatures and consumers of information in the Arab world. While the traditional media has been slow to respond to the opportunities offered by new media, others have not.

The constraints on information flows in the Arab region have left a big dent on traditional media outlets. Most radio and TV stations are government monopolies. Most major newspapers are directly or indirectly controlled by governments or businesspeople with close associations to ruling regimes. Checks and balances in the form of independent associations or

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BLOGGERS DELIVERING NEW TRANSPARENCIES IN ARAB WORLD

By Samih Toukan

Bloggging has taken its place as a notable news and opinion activity in the Arab world over the last three years. Though Arabic blogging is still at an early stage, it is rapidly becoming an important medium and a public opinion shaper in the region. Many now describe it as the alternative media and see it as a strong future contender to the mainstream media.

Maktoob.com launched its blog service in December 2005 with a core of early adopters, mainly journalists who already used the Internet.

Today Maktoob Blogs boasts over 100,000 bloggers and is growing at a fast pace. Beyond numbers alone, our Blogs community now embodies bloggers from all countries and nationalities. The subject matter varies as much as the participants, ranging from simple writings like diaries, cooking, fashion, jokes, caricature, and general writings to specialized writings in different scientific, literary, technical, social, economical, and political fields.

There is also a notable increase in interaction between bloggers themselves on their blogs as measured by comments, posts and diversity of discussed topics.

A WAY TO TAKE THE ARAB PULSE

In scanning, searching and surfing Maktoob blogs, one can feel the interaction of community interests in the Arab Middle East. One can, in effect, feel the pulse of the Arab world.

Blogs are succeeding in conveying the citizen's voice and thoughts, attitudes, opinions, reactions and experiences in all aspects of life. A major reason why is the high level of freedom of expression that blogs allow.

Authorities have been slow to see this and, accordingly, slow to crack down on the freedom of expression allowed. Signs that this is changing are beginning to emerge.

Maktoob bloggers come from decidedly different demographic groups in terms of age, gender and educational levels. The very interactivity and community-building that can be done online and across the vast geographical area of the Arab world offers a new dimension to bloggers and readers that is not offered by traditional media.

The high growth of Maktoob blogs can be attributed variously to the increase in Internet penetration in the Arab world as well as rising awareness of the importance of communication and freedom of speech. The attention of the Arab street and Arabic public opinion to public affairs due to the current political situations in the region, particularly in Iraq, Iran and Israel, is also essential. The effect of these ongoing political crises on the Arab individual's daily life has also brought blogging as a prime tool of communications to the fore.



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أكبر مجتمع عربي على الإنترنت

The success of a core of well-known journalists who published writings and views left untouched by traditional media has further whet the public appetite and contributes to increasing the number of bloggers and readers day by day.

The most important characteristics of blogs are freedom and absence of censorship. Yet these very traits are, ironically, the most important difficulties that we at Maktoob face.

The concept of accepting other people's opinions is new to Arab societies, causing some bloggers to push to ban blogs that raise controversial political, religious or social issues which differ from their own beliefs and loyalties.

As blogs spread, bloggers are learning to become more democratic and to absorb, if not accept, another's perspective.

Unfortunately however, some bloggers in the Middle East have taken to misusing their freedoms. Taking advantage of the absence of censorship, they utilize their blogs, online chat rooms and affinity groups to promote illegal or unethical topics or encourage terrorism. This has given rise to a new form of blog community-monitoring led by other bloggers who survey the electronic traffic and take spontaneous steps to effectively police what they view to be illegal or irresponsible postings.

However, the most serious issue facing the blogging revolution in the Arab World today is not the irresponsibility of bloggers but unnecessary and unneeded blocking and censoring of blogs by some governments. This is not an uncommon occurrence as Arab governments react in traditional ways to what they see as nontraditional transparency-based threats.

Maktoob blogs, for example, have been blocked in Yemen and Syria. The

Yemeni government responded to an outcry of protest from bloggers and supporters of freedom of thought and speech by unblocking the website after a few days, but the Syrians held fast with their blocking for weeks on end.

As a service provider, Maktoob is stuck in the middle. We encourage freedom of speech and free flows of information. At the same time, we need to protect the service and the bloggers from being blocked. This is an occupational hazard of our business.

Despite the blocking and the attempt by governments to censor the Internet in general and blogs in particular—as they were accustomed to with traditional media—it is unlikely that the spread of this medium can be effectively arrested.

The trends are clear in our part of the world as much as elsewhere. The Internet and its ever-changing applications are a key part of the present and, no doubt, of the future. It can be a central tool in encouraging and enabling the democratization of Arab societies. ♦

Samih Toukan cofounded Maktoob.com in 1998. With degrees from London and Paris, he previously worked for Andersen Consulting, Jordan.



Maktoob's most influential bloggers :

Blogger Name	Blog's URL
محمد حماد	3mhammad.maktoobblog.com
الصحافي أحمد موفق زيدان	ahmedzaidan.maktoobblog.com
حاج سليمان	hadji74.maktoobblog.com
إدريس الهبري	awraq-com.maktoobblog.com
د.محمد عبدالحفيظ شهاب الدين	drmohammed.maktoobblog.com
كامل النصيرات	kamel-nsirat.maktoobblog.com
ساميه فارس	asil.maktoobblog.com
زياد ابو غنيمه	ziad-1937.maktoobblog.com
حلمي الاسمر	helmialasmar.maktoobblog.com
مفتاح الكاديجي	elkadiki.maktoobblog.com
الصحفي محمد عقل	aqel59.maktoobblog.com
مريم هذيان البنغازية	maram42007.maktoobblog.com
محمد هشام كسرواني	ksrwani.maktoobblog.com
عبد الحق هقي	abdelhak-hogui.maktoobblog.com
فايز النشوان	1serano.maktoobblog.com
مازن شما	chams02.maktoobblog.com
سليم نصر الرقعي	elragihe2007.maktoobblog.com
د.حنان فاروق	fisabeelellah.maktoobblog.com
حسن محمد توفيق	elbayomy1.maktoobblog.com
زياد الجيوسي	ziadjayyosi1955.maktoobblog.com
الفيل-النت بتتكرم عربي	hadoota.maktoobblog.com

Popular and News-Driven Arab Blogs and Aggregators

Forum participants nominated the most popular and influential blogs and content aggregators on and about the Arab world today. Those named:

<http://a-mother-from-gaza.blogspot.com/>—*A Mother from Gaza*. Diary of Laila El-Haddad, a Palestinian journalist and mother who divides her time between Gaza and Durham, North Carolina. *In English*

<http://angryarab.blogspot.com/>—*The Angry Arab*. This blog by Prof. Ass'ad Abu Khalil is edgy and though it is California based it is also popular in the Arab World, especially in Lebanon. *In English*

<http://arabist.net/>—*The Arabist* is centered on Egypt but also covers other areas of the Arab world, notably the Levant and the Maghreb. While focused on political issues, it also highlights important cultural trends in the Arab world. *In English*

http://baheyya.blogspot.com—*Baheyya: Egypt Analysis and Whimsy*. Commentary on Egyptian politics and culture by an Egyptian woman who blogs under the name Baheyya. The blog has been described as quietly introspective without any of the usual chest-beating and hair tugging. *In English*

<http://benkerishan.blogspot.com/>—*The Lands of Sands*, written by a blogger purportedly from Al-Ain in the United Arab Emirates. This blog has been blocked in most Gulf countries due to its criticism of religions in general and Islam in particular as well as criticizing norms and traditions. *In Arabic*

<http://creativesyria.com/syrianbloggers/>—Creative Syria's open forum for Syria bloggers and experts. *In English*

<http://www.electronicintifada.net/>—*The Electronic Intifada*. U.S.-based Palestinian journalist Ali Abunimah maintains this blog of news and opinion on Palestine and the Middle East. *In English*

<http://fakirnihindi.wordpress.com/>—*Kafr al-Hanadwa*, literally the "Village of the Indians" or "Village of Fools/Simpletons" refers to a popular satirical weekly cartoon in the Egyptian newspaper *Akhar al-Youm*. Topics of interest include religion, politics, media and popular culture, and food. *In English*

<http://kuwaitjunior.blogspot.com/>—*Sahat Al-Safat*. A Kuwaiti site somewhere between a traditional blog,

electronic journalism and news website. The "We Want It 5" movement was started and maintained from this site—the movement has been instrumental in getting the Kuwaiti electoral law changed from about 25 or 40 districts to 5. The result is less sectarianism and tribalism controlling Kuwaiti elections. *In Arabic*

<http://mahmood.tv/>—Mahmood's Den, by Bahraini businessman Mahmood Al-Yousif, includes news and commentary on the Bahraini government, local and world politics, religion and society, as well as glimpses of his daily life and interests. *In English*

<http://misrdigital.blogspot.com/>—Egyptian Wael Abbas' award-winning blog; content is heavy with pictures and cartoons. *In Arabic*

<http://rafah.virtualactivism.net/news/todaymain.htm>—*Rafah Today*. A blog about daily life in the Palestinian city of Rafah, by Mohammed Omer. Omer is the recipient of the 2008 Martha Gelhorn Prize for Journalism from the British Academy of Film and Television Arts. *In English*

<http://sabbah.biz/>—*Sabbah Blog*. Written by Haitham Sabbah, a Palestinian activist with a large following, this blog ranks 17,948 and has an authority of 257 on Technorati. (Technorati Authority is the number of blogs linking to a website in the last six months. The higher the number, the more Technorati Authority the blog has.) *In English*

<http://saudijeans.org/>—Ahmed Al-Omran (aka the Saudi Blogfather) is also influential in Saudi. He transcends traditional sectarian divides in that country and is an active electronic campaigner who has kept the world informed of the happenings in his country and the recent detention and release of fellow Saudi blogger Fouad Al-Farhan. *In English*

<http://wa7damasrya.blogspot.com/>—Written by a Cairo-based female blogger. *In Arabic*

<http://www.2by4.org/>—written by Bader Alfraih, Kuwaiti blogger of note who is also responsible for the initiation of physical bloggers meetings in Kuwait and the creation of Kuwaiti blog aggregator www.kuwaitblogs.com. *In English*

<http://www.kuwait-unplugged.com/>—*Kuwait Unplugged* is one of the oldest blogs in the Arab world,

it has gained quite a following both from within and without Kuwait. The gentleman behind it goes by the pseudonym "Zaydoun." *In Arabic*

<http://www.manalaa.net/>—*Manal and Alaa's bit bucket*. Their greatest contribution is that they are such a good forum. *In Arabic with some English postings*

<http://www.monaeltahawy.com/blog/>—Mona Eltahawy is an award-winning New York-based journalist and commentator on Arab and Muslim issues. *In English*

Aggregators:

<http://www.albawaba.com/>—Jordan-based Arab news and blog aggregator. (English)

<http://www.arabcrunch.com>—*ArabCrunch* is one of the first Arabian originated blogs dedicated to profiling and reviewing Arab-originated startups and existing Internet and mobile companies, their products and their services. *In English, with Arabic site planned*

<http://bahrainblogs.org/>—aggregator of blogs from Bahrain. (Arabic and English)

<http://www.globalvoicesonline.org/>—non-profit global citizens' media project that presents the most influential or respected and credible bloggers or podcasters in any given country. (English)

<http://www.ikhwanweb.com/>—the Muslim Brotherhood official English language website. (English)

<http://www.islamonline.net/>—broad source of news, information on daily life and religion, family, art and culture, discussion forums. (Arabic and English)

<http://itoot.net/>—pan-Arab blog aggregator that samples diverse array of blogs and shares the most interesting ideas, posts and conversations of the day. (Arabic and English)

<http://www.jeeran.com/>—Jordan based (English)

<http://www.kuwaitblogs.com/>—Kuwaiti blog aggregator (English)

<http://www.omraneya.net/>—Egyptian blog aggregator (Arabic and English)

<http://uaecommunity.blogspot.com/>—blog forum uniting webloggers in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). (English)

Internet Accounts (in thousands)

	1999	2001	2003	2005	2007
Jordan	29	56	78	130	200
Syria	3	26	122	216	695
Egypt	63	120	647	951	1,099
Lebanon	80	120	160	200	260
Saudi Arabia	45	360	675	1,352	1,829
Kuwait	80	100	227	290	370
Qatar	9	13	32	53	87
Bahrain	20	45	49	50	77
Oman	17	41	51	78	94
UAE	128	251	350	529	878
Total by Year	473.795	1,132.205	2,390.701	3,849.753	5,586.926

Source: Arab Advisors Group (www.arabadvisors.com)

Arab World Internet Applications (%)

Jordan		Egypt	
Work	39.8	Work	23.3
Study	52.2	Study	19.3
Contacting my friends/ family	62.3	Contacting my friends/ family	77.6
Knowledge/ information	46.6	Knowledge/ information	48.9
General interests	49.6	General interests	13.5

Saudi Arabia		UAE	
Audio and video streaming	28.0	Audio and video streaming	45.2
Collecting information and research	66.2	Collecting information and research	80.6
Chatting	38.5	Chatting	63.6
Downloading files	73.4	E-mails	100.0
Social websites	72.0	Downloading files	77.3
To play online games	23.4	Social websites	46.5
Sports news	27.7	To play online games	25.4
News	49.3	Sports news	29.3
Others	11.2	News	70.6
		Others	2.0

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The 2008 Arab-U.S. Media Forum at the Dead Sea provided this opportunity. Thirty practitioners, entrepreneurs and thinkers exchanged insights, experiences and frustrations. They spoke the same new media language as if a common mother tongue. And they clearly agreed on several fundamental precepts of the field.

Such as:

- New media are typically user driven, with more control vested in the user's pull of desired content than the much more characteristic producer driven push-pull dynamics of traditional print and broadcast media.
- The barriers to entry in the field are extremely low compared to traditional forms of print and broadcast. However, the opportunity to gain attention from an information saturated public is also extremely low.
- New media enable new forms of "citizen journalism" and, due to their accessibility, a great capacity for social networking among like-minded individuals and affinity groups.
- New media provide opportunities for the marginalized individual, community or point of view to get attention and, with merit and good timing, to advance into the mainstream.
- Still today, new media are often "authorized" as reliable and their news breaks notable only when picked up by or reported on by traditional media.

Such generally agreed-upon points only scratch the surface. The pressures, priorities and, most especially, pace of new media are vastly different than those of traditional media, and quite different as well in the Arab and American worlds respectively.

New media developed as an essential source of news in the United States starting in the mid 1990's only slowly, without much fanfare. They arrived on the scene due to the entrepreneurial drive of some dot-com pioneers and technocrats and with resistance from existing media companies. Only gradually did traditional media recognize the opportunity—and the threat—and take up stewardship of the new media cause. The publisher of the *New York Times* calls one of that newspaper's primary roles "to curate the web."

The traditional print and broadcast media in the Arab world also shunned new media initially, and almost all notable new media initiatives were first developed by entrepreneurs rather than by existing news organizations.

INFORMATION TREES FALLING IN THE CRESCENDO FOREST

With this parallel ancestry, the interplay among Arab and American participants at the symposium revolved much more around questions of effect than of cause.

New media are changing the very physics of information preparation, retrieval and use. They have changed the information gauge from one in which content was scarce and attention-abundant to one in which there is an abundance—if not superabundance—of information.

Attention is the scarcest and arguably most valued commodity. There are, in effect, too many information trees falling in the forest for the ear to hear.

Stewart Brand, a pioneer of the Internet and the online field, has argued that the Internet's principal breakthrough is enabling the free flows of information. "Information wants to be free," he is famously quoted. But not always, or in the view of all.

"Information does not want to be free. It wants to be labeled, organized, and filtered so that it can



"A sharp tongue cuts deeper than a sword"

be searched, cross-referenced and consumed," write Jack Goldsmith and Timothy Wu, professors at the Harvard and Columbia Law Schools respectively. "Information filtering is especially crucial to the Net, where it is so easy to publish, and where the danger of information overload is so great."

Moreover, the Internet and worldwide web are blurring the lines between users and producer-providers. The observant and web-savvy citizen with a camcorder or smart phone has become a primary, if not always reliable, news source.

Evidence of how far this trend has come is the American blogger, Joshua Micah Marshall, founder and editor of Talking Points Memo (www.talkingpointsmemo.com), who won the coveted George Polk Award for legal reporting this year. He credited the readers of his blog and their posted contributions as the true *sine qua non* of his success. And in the Middle East, Egyptian blogger Wael Abbas—whose YouTube account was shut down by the government—has been widely recognized and applauded by others.

The very transparency that new media provide is changing the rules of governance. Information has always been a primary coin of the realm for governments, and now citizens as much as government officials are its bankers and cashiers.

There are contradictory social and information effects to be sure. Social networking facilitated by the Internet allows affinity groups to support and learn from each other, for citizens to coalesce around a cause.

Yet the socializing effect of a limited number of established news sources of the past has given

way to a confusing embarrassment of riches. The new media age is a far cry from yesteryear when, for instance, American President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's noted and infrequent Fireside Chats were heard by vast numbers of Americans at the same time and through the single medium of radio as a shared experience of community consciousness raising.

Today the capacity for a user to select and even customize his own information package can also serve to reinforce one's own existing views and prejudices rather than ventilate them with fresh perspectives. It can, in the extreme, heighten the negative social effect characterized by David Putnam's book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*.

The advent of new media in the Arab Middle East was inhibited at first by low levels of computer literacy and the high cost of Internet access in the region. Most early usage was in English only; non-English speakers need not have applied.

This is no longer the case. Internet literacy is rising and access costs dropping. Reportedly over half the pages posted on the worldwide web are not in English and more than 50 per cent of Internet use in the Arab world is now conducted in Arabic.

Governments in the Arab world, as elsewhere, are playing catch-up, struggling with the technology and new user psychology simultaneously. Arab new media insiders recognize the symptoms, speaking among themselves of "analog" and "digital" ministers.

ANALOG AND DIGITAL GOVERNMENT REACTIONS

Many governments are decidedly schizophrenic, advocating increased Internet access as an important tool for development while simultaneously undertaking awkward, often ineffective, efforts at shutting down web sites they find offensive.

The new world of online news sites, aggregators, bloggers and citizen journalism via mobile phone went largely unrecognized initially by Arab governments and was thus unthreatening to them. Arab journalists had been conditioned to self-censorship. Not so with bloggers, who typically came with little journalism experience and fewer self-constraints. Unaccountability and anonymity provided some assurance of safety in the Arab world.

Until recently, the Internet has been difficult to censor. As one insider put it, "The Net treats censorship as a technical defect, and simply routes around it." But as bloggers particularly began drawing attention to government policies and inciting opposition to unpopular actions, more sophisticated attempts to suffocate the enabling technology have occurred.

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A CHALLENGING BAGHDAD ASSIGNMENT: ARAB CORRESPONDENT FOR U.S. NETWORK

Excerpts from a Keynote Address by Her Royal Highness Princess Rym Ali of Jordan

The double-edged sword of the media is well-known to all of us, but it takes on another dimension as information is no longer the prerogative of journalists but available to all through increasing access to ever-evolving technology. With all the blogs available, with all the access to images depicting all sides and with all the willingness in the world to bring about mutual understanding, one would think there were no room for misunderstanding. The overflow of information is such that it becomes like a tower of Babel—and making sense of it all can be challenging, to say the least.

In this context, more than ever today, Arab and American journalists have a crucial role to play.

But there are limits to what even journalists in this pivotal position can do, when faced with certain realities, as I found out during my time reporting for CNN in Iraq.

I had thought—maybe a bit naively—that as an Arab journalist working for a Western news network with both a domestic and an international audience, I was in an ideal position to truly shed light on what was happening in Iraq, in all objectivity of course, but with the extra advantage of understanding the culture and language. I also felt that with my understanding of the West, where I had grown up as a child and where I later studied and was trained, I could bring some answers to the questions asked from across the Atlantic, about this faraway land many were told would be the model for democracy in the Middle East.

With that in mind I would eagerly go about my business in Baghdad, asking questions to Iraqis from all walks of life. But I would invariably be the one faced with questions, such as: Are you going to tell us that the greatest military power in the world is truly incapable of restoring electricity to our people? Is there really nothing they can do to restore law and order? Is it possible that this was not all calculated from the start to take advantage of our oil?

The questions were numerous and challenging.

What do you tell Iraqis and Arabs who ask you why the world's superpower cannot stop the looting, the kidnapping, the violence, or provide the

minimum of electricity and water sanitation, and why U.S. authorities in Iraq did not count Iraqi civilian deaths?

And as you work hard to report on what you see, in the most unbiased way possible, what do you tell millions of viewers watching you in the United

flow of unregulated content, some of which goes against intercultural dialogue and understanding.

Here, as much as in the United States or in Europe, we seek, for example, to eradicate child pornography on the Net.

Here, as much as in the United States or in Europe, we seek to control the spread and the content of violent and extremist web sites.

There is a large volume of other content on the Net that certainly does not promote or create paths to understanding between cultures, on the contrary, and that does not contribute to the harmonious and stable growth of our societies.

We perceive a great need to provide our youth, our people, with an education that allows them to take their time to harness, in a positive, knowledgeable and constructive way, the seas of “popular” wisdom that they now find on the Net.

We also need for the West, where access to knowledge, any kind of knowledge, may have become a constitutional right, not to consider countries such as ours as backward and in violation of freedom of speech, when we express concern at the content of the knowledge, the information to which our citizens, our youth in particular, are exposed.

As we suffer the consequences of an extremely volatile neighbourhood, we in Jordan feel it is important to balance security and stability concerns with the pressure, the urge, and the apparently inevitable occurrence of an unlimited, unfettered access of all individuals to all and every kind of content—at times simply created by individuals in search of an outlet to “gain their 15 megabytes of glory.” ♦

صديقك من صدقك لمن صدقك

*“Your friend is he who tells you the truth,
not he who agrees with everything you say”*



Keynote address at the 2008 Arab-U.S. Media Forum

States, as you are asked yet other questions by an anchor based in Atlanta, New York or Washington, about why their sons and daughters are being killed on a daily basis, and why many Iraqis just don't seem to appreciate their newfound freedom—all in the two minutes of airtime allotted to you?

I admit there are days when I still wonder whether I could have provided better answers.

TOO MUCH INFORMATION, TOO LITTLE KNOWLEDGE

We are all, in the Arab world as in the West, grappling with the potential consequences of the over-

Princess Rym Ali was CNN correspondent in Baghdad from 2001–2004 before moving to Amman and founding the non profit Jordan Media Institute as an Arab Center for Excellence in Journalism Education in 2007.



Jordan Media Institute • معهد الإعلام الأردني

VIRTUAL PILGRIMAGE TO MECCA

BUILDING DIALOGUE WITH AVATAR ADVOCATES

By Joshua S. Fouts (with Rita J. King)

“We are interested in understanding Islam,” Rita King said in the form of her Second Life avatar, Eureka Dejavu, a statuesque, olive-skinned female with long, flowing chestnut tresses and an exquisite business suit. My avatar, Schmilsson Nilsson, a green-skinned, seven-foot tall male with iridescent goggles and multi-colored dreadlocks, had just donned his simple, white Hajj garments (called *ihram*).

“U cannot *understand* Islam,” said Ingush, a youngish white male avatar in jeans and a button-down shirt. We stood there chatting in a “virtual realm,” three real people out there somewhere in the real world, as a fourth avatar, a male named Said, approached . . . “U need to *believe*.”

At the site of IslamOnline.net’s replica of Mecca on the path to the Hajj in the virtual world of Second Life, Rita J. King and I had just met two avatars, Ingush (who told us he was from the volatile North Caucasus region in the physical world) and Said (who said he lives in the United States and has an “Arabic root”).

“Believe in what, specifically?” Rita asked him. The answer: One God. “Is it possible,” Rita asked, “to believe in one God and not be Muslim?” Ingush, who told us he was a Sunni Muslim, said no. Said said that understanding is the first step toward belief. He asked what it was we wanted to understand about Islam.

We were doing preliminary research for “Understanding Islam through Virtual Worlds,” a project funded by a recent grant from the Richard Lounsbery Foundation, as Senior Fellows at the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs. At the suggestion of some colleagues in Qatar, Rita and I were visiting a 3-D replica of Mecca built by Cairo-based IslamOnline.net in the Virtual World of Second Life.

We got more than what we came for.



JOSHUA S. FOUTS

Fouts’s avatar, Schmilsson Nilsson, at IslamOnline.net’s virtual Mecca in the virtual world of Second Life

AN OFFER OF FRIENDSHIP DECLINED

“What I am trying to learn is, how can we begin the process of creating a better understanding between cultures?” Rita asked.

Rita and I offered Ingush and Said friendship. In Second Life an avatar can offer friendship to anyone. When a friendship offer is accepted, it allows each Second Life party to see when the other is online just as in a traditional 2-D web chatroom; when someone signs in, the other person is notified. When a potential friend declines the offer, the person on the other end knows immediately and suffers the sting of rejection with a bold message on the screen: “Your offer for friendship was declined.”

In this case, we both felt the sting instantly as we offered friendship. Ingush and Said turned us both down.

Visitors to the Mecca site click on a green duffel bag just outside the entrance. With one click the

duffel bag fills your Second Life inventory with all the accessories you need for the hajj, including a complete ihram, scissors, Qur’an holder, and stone thrower. As Rita and I were chatting with Ingush and Said we were instant messaging each other privately. “What is the stone-thrower for?” she asked. I Googled the meaning and learned that it was the ritual practice of “emulating Ibrahim, Isma’il and Hajar, who were each tempted by Iblis (Satan) to ... sacrifice Isma’il. Each drove Iblis off with stones.”

Though she had clicked the hajj gear in her inventory in an attempt to wear her ihram, it had never “rezzed,” the Second Life colloquialism for an item has not yet become visible on the screen. Or, in this case, it was not visible on Eureka Dejavu’s body. Eureka Dejavu stood there on the virtual path to Mecca with her head uncovered.

Rita explained to me what was going on and wondered if they were interpreting her attire to mean that she was choosing to ignore their cultural

tradition or, worse yet, was ignorant that the tradition even existed. Despite Rita's best attempt at showing respect for their cultural mores, they had no way of knowing what she was trying to do.

IJTIHAD MISTAKEN FOR JIHAD

Ingush asked if we were Muslims and we told him about our mission.

Rita had just completed reading *The Trouble with Islam Today: A Muslim's Call for Reform in Her Faith*, by Irshad Manji. She explained that what she really wanted was to understand the concept of "ijtihad," which she interpreted, after reading the book, as a form of critical thought: individual soul-searching.

Rita asked Ingush and Said about the role of ijtihad in the lives of a modern Muslims. Unfortunately the language and culture barrier acted against her with Ingush, who mistakenly read the question as one about jihad, not *ijtihad*. He thought she was being hostile, and the tension was palpable. Rita could have logged out of Second Life at any time and ended the conversation. Same with Ingush. But they both stayed in-world to resolve the conflict.

The semantic skirmish between them cleared up, however, when Rita asked Ingush to scroll up and read what she had written in the chat text. At this, we once again offered Ingush and Said friendship. Significantly, this time they *both* accepted. The experience left us wondering how many battles are triggered by misunderstood words, real or imagined.

The exchange between Ingush and Said would be as unlikely to have happened in the physical world as it would be for two male and female, non-Muslim Americans to walk up to two strangers outside Mecca and ask them about itjihad. In fact, one could safely say it could never have happened. The societal regulations and barriers we place around interactions in the physical world often inhibit the opportunity to talk to strangers, to be vulnerable, to ask burning questions, to expose oneself to criticism. The real and perceived risks are too high.

Because virtual worlds eliminate the vulnerability of physical interaction, it becomes possible

for a woman from New York and a Sunni Muslim from a volatile region in the Caucasus to not only misunderstand each other, but also to move beyond the confusion toward the first inklings of mutual trust. ♦

Joshua S. Fouts is Chief Global Strategist of Dancing Ink Productions (www.eurekadejavu.com), a virtual world consulting firm. Rita J. King is CEO and Creative Director.



RITA J. KING

King's avatar, Eureka Dejavu, after a visit to IslamOnline.net's presence in the virtual world of Second Life, where visitors can participate in a virtual hajj.

SECOND LIVES

A virtual world is a three-dimensional, immersive space accessible in real time by people around the world. In the case of Second Life, for example, it is specifically *not* a game with explicit rules and goals. In Second Life there are no rules.

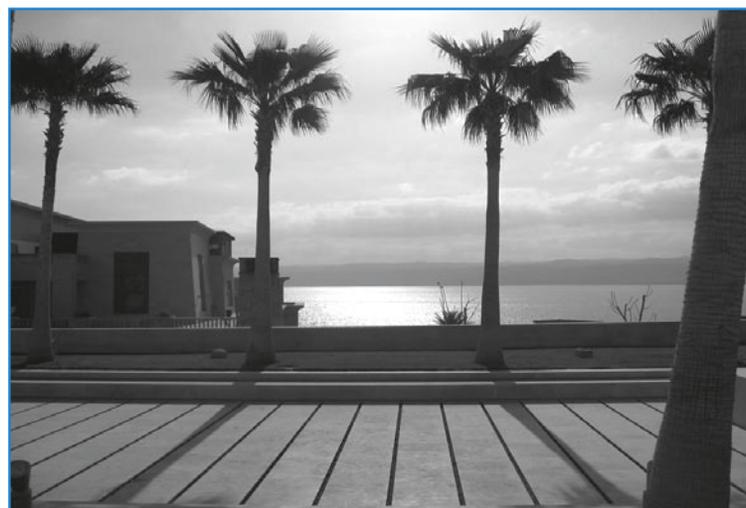
In this virtual space, players create "avatars" (or 3-D representations of themselves), build houses, clothes, and relationships, and essentially conduct "second" lives. This provides increased opportunities for engagement with the people who visit them, the communities they build, and the spaces they inhabit.

Second Life is inherently global—with almost 16 million registered users, less than 20% of whom are from the United States. People in Second Life communicate using a mixture of text and voice, including devices which simultaneously translate text in nearly a dozen languages.

—J. Fouts

مَا كُلُّ مَا يَعْلَمُ قِيَالُ

"not everything that is known can be told"



KATE AISHTON

(Kuttab, continued from page 1)

oversight by academic and media critics have been largely absent in the Arab countries.

This stifling atmosphere has created a generation of journalists who have either fled their native countries or had to practice self-censorship to survive financially—and sometimes physically.

Transnational satellite and the worldwide web have together jolted this media culture out of its deep sleep.

The result was first noticed and embraced by democracy-seekers as well as militant Islamists, with governments and traditional media only paying attention at a later stage. Whether it was the pan Arab Al Jazeera satellite station or the tens of thousands of bloggers on Maktoob, the Arab world's equivalent of hotmail, information started breaking out of the blockade that had been erected physically and through administrative means by various undemocratic regimes.

By and large the majority of new media practitioners do not come from the media world itself. Self-censorship had left an entire generation of Arabs on the outside of this new phenomenon looking in while the young generation worked and developed its different angles.

For some it started as a hobby or form of self-expression and quickly took on added import:

- A video of Egyptian police torture, shot as a joke and ending up in the hands of blogger Wael Abbas, whose posting of it changed his life and career;
- A businessman, Bahrain's Mahmood Yousifi, working in technology and tinkering with Google Earth only to discover his own country and the fact that vast strips of land inaccessible to the housing-deprived public were available only to the rulers for their hunting parties;
- The long-term research of North African blogger Sami be Gharbia who, in cooperation with European colleagues, traced the travel of a presidential plane at a time when the president officially never left the country.

While most of these early efforts were individual, some have been organized through a university like the American university of Cairo, a media NGO such as AmmanNet or a technology business like Maktoob. A multi-language website specializing in freedom of expression, Menasset.com, has been well established.

Unfettered by the strict controls of governments or their surrogate publishers, the new media has broken taboos, exposed corruption and abuse and allowed the Arab community at large to express itself more freely than ever.

Unlike the U.S., where existing media outlets

have put themselves in the forefront of the new media buzz, most traditional Arab media outlets are lagging behind and unable to shake the shackles that they have been born into and perpetuated. Success in this new media field cannot be manipulated, but must be earned by gaining a skeptical public's trust.

GOVERNMENTS IN A QUANDARY

The Information Revolution has arrived with a vengeance in the Arab world. New technologies have leveled the information playing field worldwide, limited only by the restrictive practices of Arab governments.

Ruling regimes in the Arab world have chosen to tackle the issue simply by identifying new media activists and punishing them as an example to other pretenders. While a number of individuals have been harassed and jailed, this tactic has failed to deter the majority of new media content creators and users.

It may well have resulted only in more and more new media activists hiding their identities by working anonymously.

The fact that this new media is borderless means that it has been much more difficult for governments to exercise control.

Government legislation didn't initially deal with the Web and it was difficult for governments to punish a virtual media outlet except by creating an electronic ban for local users, a difficult

أَسَاسُ الْمَلِكِ

"Justice is the foundation of government"

and expensive process easily bypassed by clever technical experts. Repressing the web also ran contrary to attempts by many of the same governments to take advantage of the economic benefits of globalization.

It put governments in a quandary, embracing the free flow of goods and services while wanting to inhibit the free flow of information.

FILTERING—WITH EMPATHY AND SENSITIVITY

The endless amounts of information that the new media opportunities provide require a set of filters to navigate and decipher.

Major companies such as Yahoo, Google, and YouTube have a responsibility in the way they deal with the Middle East that is going through the birth

AN ENABLING TECHNOLOGY FOR IMPROVED CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

Possibilities for Arab-U.S. cooperation in the new media field are many. The global nature of the Net means that it can be leveraged to help bring attention to, as well as use, this network to campaign on behalf of jailed bloggers or restricted online journalists.

Improved networking between Arab and American online practitioners can help correct faulty information, misleading analysis and cultural stereotyping. The networking possibilities can help both sides discover blind spots and work to correct them in real time.

Moreover, journalists are always looking for authentic voices, reliable sources and knowledgeable contacts. The networking connections of online media provides publishers with inexpensive connections in various parts of the world and real-time reactions from on-the-ground sources as news events occur.

—D. Kuttab

pains of reform. Technical robots alone can't overcome some of the problems that can arise when dealing with a region that is large, different and highly volatile.

The human element will always be central when dealing with relations between differing and energetic regions such as the U.S. and the Arab world.

The situation may call for a unique form of U.S.—Arab cooperation in articulating, developing and continually nurturing such an electronic filter that can help bring a level of credibility to the Net in the eyes of Arab users and, at the same time, remove the excuse from Arab governments and their surrogates who are happy to pounce on this new platform using the abuses by a minority as their excuse.

Such filtering must be handled with the utmost sensitivity so as not to give the impression of censorship or manipulation of a source of free information. It must advance freedom of expression, not restrict it. It is, in short, a delicate balancing act. ♦

Daoud Kuttab, currently teaching at Princeton University, is a Palestinian journalist and media activist who helped establish the Arab Media Internet Network (AMIN) in 1995.



GENERATION FACEBOOK

CREATING EGYPT'S "POLITICAL PARTY OF THE INTERNET"

By Mona Eltahawy

On any given day, the social networking site Facebook connects long-lost friends and allows you to “poke” attractive strangers you wish would be your friends. But in Egypt, Facebook is the stage for the latest twist in the generation gap, playing host to politically hungry young Egyptians eager to take on their aging leader.

Last May 4, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak turned 80. To mark the big day for the man who has ruled them for 26 years, Egyptians who knew no other leader and who were increasingly going online to challenge him urged their compatriots to go on strike, wear black, and write “No” to Mubarak on their money.

I know all of this, not through news stories, but because activists publicized the details and demands of the strike on Facebook. I don't know most of my 724 “friends” on Facebook, but their messages and their status updates have become invaluable to me—especially my Facebook friends from Egypt.

STRIKING DEMANDS

A group promoting the May 4 strike has almost 74,000 members, up from about 60,000 a month ago. Its demands are a minimum wage, salary raises linked to inflation, and legislation and other measures to control prices. As admirable as those goals are, I am just as in awe of the creativity that pours into Facebook.

One Egyptian posted a rap song in colloquial Arabic that sounded as if it was recorded at a coffee shop—complete with the sound of water pipes and

the click-clack of teacups hitting saucers. While the coffee shop patron's rap lists the country's woes, pictures of t-shirts illustrate the target of the song and the May 4 strike: A black one tells Mubarak simply, “It was a black day when you arrived.”

To understand how rattled Mubarak's regime is by the increasing popularity of what one young man called the “Political Party of the Internet,” look no further than Egypt's queen and king of Generation Facebook: Esra Abdel Fattah, 27, and Bilal Diab, 20.

Esra was detained for more than three weeks for forming a Facebook group calling Egyptians to take part in an April 6 general strike. Her group collected more than 60,000 names. She was released after her mother personally appealed to Mubarak and his wife.

What but desperation would inspire a regime with 26 years under its belt to detain a 27-year-old over a Facebook group?

That was essentially what Bilal told Egyptian Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif when the latter gave a speech at Cairo University urging Egyptian youth to go online to express themselves. The student interrupted the older man to remind Nazif that there were several young Egyptians in jail for doing exactly what the premiere was calling for. Police promptly whisked Bilal off for several hours, and turning him into a hero for the independent media. The state-owned media did their best to ignore him.

No doubt Esra and Bilal's run-ins with Mubarak's security forces were meant to teach their online cohorts to swear off the internet. Not likely. “We are all Esra” became the name of a popular group on Facebook.

Young activists like Esra and Bilal are uniquely positioned to step into the cracks that have widened in Egypt lately: An aging dictator and his out-of-touch cabinet are rumored to be the richest men in Egypt's modern history, at a time when spiraling food prices are grinding most Egyptians deeper into misery. Recently, at least 11 people have died while lining up for bread.

Another active Facebooker, Mohammed Abdel Hai, who posted that rap song in support of the May 4 strike, told a television show host recently that he turned to the internet out of sheer frustration. At university he wanted neither of the only two options available: Mubarak's National Democratic Party or the Muslim Brotherhood, the political Islamist movement that is Egypt's largest opposition group.

Generation Facebook is the godchild of two important developments that took off over the past



three years in Egypt: an increasingly bold blogging movement and street activism.

In 2005, activists breached not just laws against public demonstrations but taboos against protesting against Mubarak himself, with street protests that focused on Egypt and its internal discontents. But that 2005 movement was criticized for being out of touch with the needs of ordinary Egyptians and for failing to rally the masses.

This year's internet-inspired activism has flipped the script—the needs of the masses have sparked a wave of unprecedented activism among young Egyptians.

VISUAL EMPATHY

When I asked my younger sister Nora, 21, why she joined the April 6 strike in Cairo, she said watching people crying on television because they didn't have 35 Egyptian pounds (less than \$7) to feed their families broke something in her. Two of her friends, also women in their early 20s, were detained for two days for taking part in a downtown Cairo demonstration in support of the strike.

In 2005, the Kefaya protest movement and the Muslim Brotherhood would announce demonstrations and hope ordinary Egyptians would join them. Now both those movements are joining the May 4 strike called by the Facebook activists.

The April 6 strike was sporadic and focused mostly on the Nile Delta town of Mahalla el-Kobra where at least two people were killed and more than 150 injured in two days of rioting. A Facebook group for the May 4 strike consoled Egyptians by reminding them that “God created the world in six days. We can't change Egypt in one day.”

Egypt's Generation Facebook, unlike its octogenarian leader, has time on its side. ♦

Mona Eltahawy, a participant in several Arab-U.S. Media Forums, is a journalist and commentator on Arab and Muslim issues. This article was prepared for her syndicate, AgenceGlobal.



(Snow, continued from page 4)

“If your staff is well trained and with good research backing you up and some legal protection, then it’s very tough for governments to crack down,” remarked Rana Sabbagh, Amman-based director of the Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism. “But if your staff is not well trained, then you’re just sending out suicide bombers.”

Significantly, the most important and commercially successful of these Arab aggregators, Maktoob.com, was developed in Jordan, that Arab country with the highest rate of computer literacy and Internet application whose government is active in boosting it.

Based on Web 2.0, Maktoob is now 70 percent user produced and counts a total of 700,000 blogs in 22 countries. About 100 blogs are added daily. Maktoob is financially successful as well. But its founder Sami Toukan, a participant at the Dead Sea conference, sees a cloudy future. “The promise of the Internet is under threat,” he told the conference participants. “The dream of one Internet world is being dashed. We’re fighting a holding action with governments now.”

OLD REPTILES AND NEW BIRDS

All media analysts talk of convergence. The group gathered at the Dead Sea was no exception. The normal idea—convergence between types of media—was expanded by participants to convergence among those who practice different media ways and means. Are the journalist and the blogger merging into one?

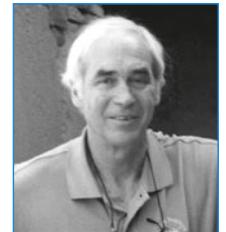
The Arab–U.S. Media Forum participants fell into two camps regarding whether new media activists can truly claim professional journalist status as compared to what one called “diarists.” There was no disagreement, however, that the media rules are changing almost faster than those engaged can react or attach labels to themselves.

Internet access not only makes possible interactivity between users, but also altogether new approaches to the *who, why’s and how’s* of information delivery. Until the present, the speed of downloading information has always exceeded the speed of uploading, as a function of supply and demand. This is beginning to change as bloggers plant and seed information at unprecedented rates.

Still, full convergence of the time-honored professional journalist who relies on long-cultivated sources for inside information while utilizing traditional print and broadcast forms, and the new breed of cyberspace activist, an open-source citizen surfer diarist, is neither imminent nor inevitable.

As one evolutionary-oriented forum participant aptly put it, “No one is asking bloggers to come in at 10:00 in the morning and drink bad coffee. There is too much difference between the new and the old. It’s a matter of Darwin, with old reptiles and new birds.” ♦

Crocker Snow Jr., founding editor of The WorldPaper, is director of the Edward R. Murrow Center of public Diplomacy at the Fletcher School.



Citizen Bloggers: Apprehended and Under Arrest

A known total of 64 citizen bloggers unaffiliated with news organizations were arrested by authoritarian regimes around the world last year, three times the 2006 total, according to the latest World Information Access Report.

One-third of those arrested were in the Arab Middle East, in the study prepared by researchers at the University of Washington.

The growing number of arrests is driving many citizen bloggers underground to blog anonymously on MySpace or YouTube, according to Phil Howard, an assistant professor of communications who led the research team.

The rising arrest numbers reflect the growing number of

citizens who blog internationally and increased recognition among authoritarian governments that citizen bloggers cause problems.

“By targeting non-professional journalists who express themselves online, authoritarian governments can promote fear among Internet users,” Howard says.

Citizen bloggers arrested typically were exposing bureaucratic corruption, human rights abuses or expressing opinions about political figures and public policy according to the study authors. By contrast, blogger arrests in democratic countries typically involve pornography postings or inciting racial hatred.

Blogging Activities	Total	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008–1st Q
Using blog to organize or cover social protest	15	China (4)			Egypt, Iran	Burma (2), China, Egypt (4), Iran	Egypt
Violating cultural norms	14			Singapore (3)	Egypt, Greece, USA	China, Egypt (2), Hong Kong, India, Philippines	Egypt, UK
Posting comments about public policy	12		France	Iran (2), Tunisia	Egypt, Iran	Fiji, Malaysia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Thailand	Syria
Exposing corruption or human rights violations	9	Iran				China (3), Tunisia	Burma
Other reason, or no reason given	8				Canada, China, Syria	China, Egypt, Fiji, Malaysia, Thailand, USA (2)	
Posting comments about political figures	6		Iran	Egypt		Egypt, Iran, Kuwait, Russia	
Total Number of Cases	64	5	2	7	10	35	5

Source: World Information Access Project, www.wiareport.org, 2008.

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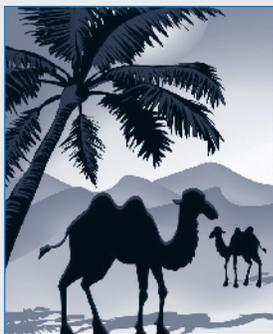
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Seated: Rana Sabbagh, Mahmood Al-Yousif, Her Royal Highness Princess Rym, Walter Isaacson, Betsy Morgan, Daoud Kuttab; *Standing (front row):* Moukhtar Kocache, Mirette Mabrouk, Jamal Dajani, Joshua Fouts, Charlie Firestone, Merrill Brown, Akram Farag, Mohamed Gohar, Khaled Dawoud
Standing (back row): Osama Al-Sharif, Lawrence Pintak, Calvin Sims, Ali Abunimah, Barbara Slavin, Crocker Snow Jr., Jed Alpert, Caroline Little, Wael Abbas, Monroe Price, Nermeen Murad, Samih Toukan, Monika Lengauer, Amy Garmer.



An Oasis of Recommendations

The Dead Sea dialogue—like the annual Arab–U.S. Media Forums before it that took place in Luxor, Dubai and the Wye Plantation in Maryland starting in February 2004—focused on practical approaches for improving media performance in covering culturally and politically sensitive Arab and American issues. Participants divided into three working groups with mixed Arab and American members to advance ideas to help fulfill the Forum's purpose. The recommendations for establishing a Facebook page to facilitate continuing dialogue among participants has been followed.

FOR ARAB MEDIA

- ✦ Minimize legislation governing content, maximize effective access to information and remove criminal penalties for defamation and the expression of opinion.
- ✦ Push for wider Internet access at lower cost and without government interference with users. Encourage a regional ombudsman for the service and protection of Arab bloggers.
- ✦ Support educational enterprises for media and journalism; identify, encourage and celebrate “champion” new media endeavors.

FOR U.S. MEDIA

- ✦ Provide links to useful Arab websites, encourage visibility for Arab bloggers by compiling list of contacts for U.S. media outlets.
- ✦ Develop FAQ products for American journalists writing about the Middle East.
- ✦ Encourage engagement in international or regional digital journalism organizations like OPA and ONA.

FOR BRIDGING CULTURES

- ✦ Promote traditional journalism review online featuring info exchanges among Arab and U.S. journalists, critiques, best practices, freedom of press, training and related professional issues.
- ✦ Establish Facebook feature for Arab and American journalism participants designed by top U.S. online architects after meeting together to work up most appealing and appropriate design.
- ✦ Create avatar-enabled three-dimensional feature to facilitate viral meetings of Arab and U.S. citizen journalists to encourage empathy and “putting oneself in the other’s time and space.”

CREDITS

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