

The Internet and the Arab world as a virtual public sphere

Khalil Rinnawi

“Cyberspace will undoubtedly facilitate the spread of democracy across the world.” (Resnick 1998: 67).

Introduction

“Unfortunately we Arabs are experiencing a great catastrophe that we are creating for ourselves, which we have received from our regimes, whereby we talk a lot and do nothing. We are talking to one another, but we are not talking in the true sense – rather, fighting one another, accusing one another, and cursing one another. The root of all this is ignorance, caused by our regimes that cannot stand up against America and Israel, is because they fear the punishment of overturning the entire regime. This fear exists because all Arab regimes are illegitimate, and use religion to suppress the Arab people politically and socially.” (Mohammad, al-Jazeera.net, September 11, 2002). This statement is a clear example of how different Arab participants, (both within and outside of the Arab world), use the Internet to express critical opinions, unfamiliar in traditional media, including newspapers, television, and radio; and even via transnational Arab satellite TV, considered freer than traditional media.

Emergence of the Internet in the Arab world dates back to the beginning of the 1980s; it quickly became a useful tool for mass communication in this part of the world. Today, the Internet can be accessed in every Arab country and the number of users grows monthly^a.

This article discusses how Arabs have and continue to use the Internet, for reshaping the public sphere through expanding the margins of freedom of expression. In the circumstances of very narrow margins of freedom of expression and regime controlled mass media, as in the Arab World, the Internet is proving its ability to increase opportunities for individuals and groups to discuss and make political and socio-cultural issues more renowned; and to allow the contesting of cultural, political, and religious interpretations which are given forms of legitimacy through their distribution, responses and further critiques. In addition, the article examines how,

unlike the traditional Arab mass media, the Internet de-legitimizes Arab regimes in particular through converting traditionally private conversations into public discussions, and how Iraq, Palestine and September 11th have impacted heavily on participants in websites studied, and are increasingly critiqued. Finally, the article discusses how, in the case of the Arab World, despite the Internet's unlimited borders as a public sphere, because it is worldwide - these borders are limited to the Arabic speaking population due to the language limitation and, more important, due to the issue of the Arab people's concern which, in turn, creates a new Pan-Arabism, a virtual Pan-Arabism.

Arab traditional media as tribal media

As part of the nation-state building process, prior to the era of Internet and other transnational media, the operation of state-run electronic and other media was oriented towards shaping collective ethno-national identity according to the post-colonial boundaries of each Arab nation-state (Boyd, 1993; Karram 1999). These are a kind of 'tribal media', written and electronic, operating within a defined geopolitical unit (state or other sociopolitical entities), with closed borders (Rinnawi, forthcoming). This arrangement limited the infiltration of external mass media content, including logistical obstacles, such as the limited broadcast range of terrestrial television stations, as well as limitations created by the political regime – such as various regulations and censorship – on the one hand, in order to prevent the exposure of the internal community to these external media. On the other hand, there are hardly any opportunities for the participation of the media consumers, the public, or for any deviation from the mainstream ideas or opinions held by the ruling elite. Thirdly, the prospects of a mutual exchange of ideas or discussions among the people through the media in these same countries are very limited and, of course, were and still are lacking between people from different countries (Karram, 1999). This was achieved using a combination of coercion and co-optation, with careful monitoring of public opinion, to understand what might lay beyond the bounds of popular acceptance. In addition, many governments allowed for the emergence of a kind of loyal opposition, permitting a diversity of views within implicit boundaries. Doing so allowed new ideas to gestate and kept the intelligentsia in line without actually threatening the government's ultimate grip on power. The media – initially printed, followed by radio and television – played an important role in this equation by both

disseminating government viewpoints and providing a forum for carefully modulated criticism and commentary on government policies (Alterman, 1998). This tribal media arrangement was set up by the political elite not only to preserve the political regime, but also to maintain the socio-cultural order and the cultural religious values that provide the foundation for the legitimacy of the existing political order. The reinforcement of the traditional patriarchal society (Sharabi, 1985), which is part of this media policy, also aims to sustain the existing media model.

Consequently, under these circumstances, the public sphere is virtually non-existent as the media operate in one direction, from the regime to the population, without any kind of feedback. There is one agency that determines which issues will be included and how they can be dealt with or discussed by the media. Audiences are passive rather than active consumers. Public discourse regarding social or political issues is alien to this kind of media.

The Internet's Public Sphere

The Internet has essentially created a new public space - "cyberspace," - a concept with contesting definitions. Toulouse describes cyberspace as "a new transnational realm of civil society" (1998: 5), while Resnick (1998: 48) questions the transformative quality researchers have attributed to cyberspace: "...ordinary everyday politics has captured Cyberspace" (ibid), arguing that cyberspace has undergone a process of "normalization": "[it] has not become the locus of a new politics that spills out of the computer screen and revitalizes citizenship and democracy." (ibid: 49). Similarly, according to Streck (1998: 29): "Cyberspace does not expand text into experience, it reduces experience to text". Arguably, cyberspace might be best understood as the latest manifestation of nature's pluralization (Luke, 1998: 121). This is supported by Warren (1995), who defines the public sphere as "an arena in which individuals participate in discussions about matters of common concern, in an atmosphere free of coercion or dependencies (inequalities) that would incline individuals toward acquiescence or silence" (ibid:171).

The public sphere varies in alternative expressions of social and political topics both from popular and traditional elite views that are joined by opposition and alternative groups. They range from political activists to religious figures, from mobilizers to

witnesses. They both recruit and propagandize, bringing their issues into a wider, already public sphere, in some cases; but in others they carve a new space that encompasses or repackages those existing, compelling dialogue by leveraging forms of communication that reshape the social field.

These convergences affirm a sense of participation in a public sphere of (cyberspeak) browsers, affirming interpretive freedom to supplant the previously felt need to reach out to others with similar needs; hence, the virtual community becomes a public sphere.

In addition, the Internet, as a channel, is quickly overtaken by the use of its techniques and the sense of confidence in their authority to carry messages of mutual recognition to a similar public of others. Not only are texts made available, but also interpretations that apply intellectual techniques developed elsewhere than the texts themselves. These include responsibility for interpretation that goes beyond challenging received views to a broader pattern of expanding the public sphere.

Consequently, the Internet enables, through a new public space without previous cultural authorities and historical frameworks of engagement, particularly between elite and subaltern, a new class of interpreters, who are facilitated by this medium in addressing and thereby reframing political, social authority and expression for those like themselves and others who visit (Anderson, 2000).

The importance of the Internet and its role in the creation and sustaining of the public sphere renders unique importance in those parts of the world that lack the tools and basic sociopolitical circumstances for the functioning of such a public sphere, as is the case in the Arab World, in which regime controlled traditional mass media allow very small margins in this sphere which can be accessible to all sectors of society, parties and individuals. Therefore, in this case, examining the role of the Internet in the sustaining and empowerment of the public sphere has great significance.

Internet in the Arab world

Internet Penetration^b

According to Ajeeb.com, there are now 3.54 million Internet users in the Arab world, this number has risen 1.5 million in the past year, (March 2001). In October of 2002, a research study conducted by the Madar Research Group^c predicted that the number of Internet users in the Arab world will reach 25 million by the end of 2005. These research results led the company to predict that by the end of 2002, over 8.2 million people in the Arab region will have Internet access. In the first quarter of 2001, net penetration in the region stood at 1.20%, and surged to 2.54% by the end of the third quarter of 2002; Madar now predicts that by 2005 the Arab Internet penetration rate will reach 8%.

Research studies conducted by the Arab Advisors Group and Ajeeb.com (March 2001) both indicate that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has the highest Internet penetration rate in the Arab world with 27.69% of the population having net access and approximately 900,000 users. In the course of 2002, the number of dial-up Internet subscribers in UAE increased by 10.5% , according to Emirates Internet & Multimedia (EIM) (October 2002). Figures released by EIM indicate that the total number of dial-up subscribers in the UAE rose from 256,000 in 2001 to 283,000 at the end of 2002. Bahrain was found to have the second highest penetration rate in the region with 22.06%. Both countries are expected to increase their penetration rates substantially over the coming years with 38% of the UAE having net access by the end of 2005, compared to 32% in Bahrain.

Currently, Saudi Arabia has the single largest Internet community among all Arab countries with 1.6 million Internet users. Egypt and the UAE follow with 1.5 million and 900,000 users respectively. It is estimated that by the end of 2005, Egypt will have the highest number of Internet users in the Arab region with 6.5 million net users; Saudi Arabia will have the second highest number of Internet users in the Arab world with 4.48 million, while Algeria will have 2.4 million. However, while most Arab nations are expected to see a significant rise in their online populations, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Sudan will continue to trail behind other countries despite a two- and threefold increase in the number of Internet users. In comparison, according to

Nielsen NetRatings (2001), in November 2001 Israel's Business Arena reported 1.93 million people with Internet access in Israel, with the number of active home Internet users totaling 956,000, up from 920,840 in September.

A forecast by The Arab Advisors Group predicts that there will be close to half a million Jordanians online by 2006 (November, 2002). It is estimated that the number of Internet subscribers in Jordan will total 71,000 at the end of 2002, a penetration rate of 1.33%. This is opposed to the year 2001, in which there were 56,000 Internet accounts in Jordan – indicating a growth of 27% between 2001 and 2002. The Internet penetration rate in Kuwait is expected to grow from 7.59% in 2001, to 16.5% in 2006, according to a new report from Arab Advisors Group (May, 2002). It is predicted that the number of Syrians using the Internet will reach 630,000 by 2006, a user penetration rate of 3.17% (The Arab Advisors Group, April 2002).

The table below concisely summarizes the data discussed in the text above.

Internet Access within the Middle East

COUNTRY	DATE	NUMBER	% POP
U.A.E.	December 2001	900,000	36.79
	December 2000	735,000	31.02
Bahrain	December 2001	140,200	21.36
	December 2000	40,000	6.31
Israel	July 2001	1,940,000	21.39
	January 2001	1,270,000	17.12
Qatar	March 2001	75,000	9.75
	March 2000	45,000	6.22
Kuwait	December 2001	200,000	9.47
	December 2000	150,000	7.6
Lebanon	December 2000	300,000	8.38
	March 2000	227,500	6.39
Oman	December 2001	120,000	4.42
	December 2000	90,000	3.55
Jordan	December 2001	212,000	3.99
	December 2000	127,300	2.55
Saudi Arabia	March 2001	570,000	2.5
	March 2000	300,000	1.4
Syria	December 2001	60,000	0.35
	December 2000	30,000	0.18

Yemen	March 2001	14,000	0.08
	March 2000	12,000	0.07
Iraq	December 2000	12,500	0.05
Palestine	March 2001	60,000	-
	October 1999	23,520	-

Source: (Madar Research Group) and (Arab Advisors Group) and (Emirates Internet & Multimedia (EIM)) and (Ajeeb.com).

In addition, The Arab Advisors Group survey found that the average number of users per Internet account in most Arab countries is three. Jordan has six users per account due to the popularity of Cybercafés and the high cost of home access. Egypt has eight users per account as many users go online at universities. Iraq has the highest number of users per account at 25, largely due to the United Nations sanctions against Iraq.

The Arab Advisors Group studied available bandwidth and Internet subscriber numbers in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and the UAE and found that available Internet bandwidth in the Middle East grew by 154% to 1.9 Gbps between August 2001 and January 2002 (January 2002). These eight countries had over 1.08 million Internet subscribers by the end of 2001, up 47%, or 348,000 subscribers, since 2000. (More than one user may use each subscription). In terms of Internet bandwidth, Oman had the highest per subscriber score with 3.7, followed by Morocco (bandwidth of 1.94), Egypt (1.71), and the UAE (1.36). Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria all had below average bandwidth-per-subscriber scores.

User Profiles

In 1999 PC Middle East found that 70% of Internet users in the Arab World were between ages 21 to 35; only 4.5% were over age 45. Of the Internet users surveyed, more than half had received at least a high school diploma. Education and age appear to be two key factors influencing Internet use and participation. By extension, high concentrations of Arab University students are Internet users. According to a study conducted by Wheeler (2001) that examined Internet usage in Kuwait, the main users included Islamists, businessmen and women, the Kuwaiti government, journalists/newspapers, teachers/professors, medical professionals and students.

Emirates Internet & Multimedia reports that 39% of the Internet users in the region go online from their homes. In comparison, 56% access the net from both home and work, and 6% only go online from work. According to EIM, around 76% of the Internet users in the UAE are male. Over 60% of the net users are Asian, and only 25% are Arabs. Westerners comprise 10% of the local online population. Most Internet users in the UAE tend to be both young and highly educated; the average age is 27 and 59% of users are college graduates. This report also indicates that around 41% of the Internet users are based in the capital city of Dubai, and around 29% in Abu Dhabi and Al-Ain.(Emirates Internet & Multimedia).

Limitations to Internet Use in the Arab World

There are a variety of barriers that make it difficult for many Arabs to freely access the Internet. For the majority of Arabs, language is a major barrier to Internet use since the primary language is English.^d The prohibitive cost of equipment and software also hinders most potential Internet users. The former must be imported and is taxed as a luxury item in most countries; the latter is expensive and often pirated.

Internet connections constitute another obstacle to Internet use in many Arab countries. In most of the countries a single account with full Internet access costs between 20 to 30 USD per month^e. Thus, a potential user must have access to an adequate amount of money, a fact which keeps the Internet out of the hands of the vast bulk of the population in most Arab countries. Even though Internet cafes have become more popular and less expensive with time, they are still relatively expensive for daily use by the majority of Arabs, with the exception of the Gulf region. Many Arab countries also lack the infrastructure required to enable wide-scale data transmission over their phone lines. This insufficient line space connecting the Internet and the rest of the world makes it extremely difficult to enable a high level of traffic.

In addition to these obstacles, government prohibitions have resulted in the Internet not being available to the public, in Iraq and Syria for example. In other countries, such as Tunisia^f, state monitoring may also turn potential users away. In Bahrain, UAE, and Saudi Arabia, all Internet traffic passes through a single government-controlled gateway (Alterman, 1998). Governments can use the gateway to ban access

to certain sites, and also to monitor e-mail communication. Other governments, particularly Egypt and Jordan, have taken a more hands-off attitude toward the Internet, even as they enforce laws that curb other means of expression. Lebanon, Algeria, Morocco, and the Palestinian Authority have made little, if any, effort so far to control online content, allowing Internet users free access (ibid).

Research Questions

Data from previous research studies clearly indicates that the Internet is growing in popularity and the numbers of Internet subscribers and Internet penetration rates are increasing in many Arab countries. In addition, the Internet, as a virtual public sphere, can be considered a tool of interaction and communication, encouraging dialogue and debate among participants. Thus, this study was conducted to answer the following research questions:

- Within the struggle for democracy and freedom of expression, can we see the Internet as a tool for creating a public sphere between Arabs from different places inside the Arab world and between Arabs in Diaspora? If so, how?
- What are the most discussed topics and issues in the Internet – social, cultural, or political?
- What topics are most suggested by those responsible for the Web within each of the three levels, and how are they discussed (dynamics of discussion)?

Methodology

This study was conducted during September 2002 by two research assistants to examine the following nine Arabic websites: aljazeera.net, arabia.com, maktoob.com, arabtimes.com, amin.org, konouz.com, arabian2000.com, ya-hala.co.il, and arab48.com^g. Research concentrated on three sections of each website: current events polls; the open floor, and discussion forums/rooms. Current events polls are always present on the website's homepage and involve visitors answering questions, providing their opinions, and feedback regarding a current issue. Open floor rooms are based on a pre-selected topic. Visitors are invited to debate and express their

opinions and views. Discussion forums/rooms involve total freedom of expression. Visitors choose their own topics and leave the floor open for debate.

This kind of research has its own limitations – user profiles, particularly between Arabs participating from outside the Arab world and from within could not be distinguished, although this would have provided even broader possibilities of analysis. The results are more qualitative in nature than quantitative.

Findings

The findings of the research are first summarized and classified according to the three sections chosen.

Current events poll

During September 2002 there were 27 surveys in 8 websites^h. Each survey ran for a period of around two weeks. On the average, 3,000 users participated in each poll, with the exception of aljazeera.net with around 20,000.

Arabia.com had 15 surveys covering political, religious, economic, social, and cultural issues. These included topics such as: Are you addicted to chat rooms on the Internet? Do you listen to Arabic music through the Internet? Which satellite television stations do you follow for Arabic news? What might Real Madrid gain by purchasing Ronaldo? Pan-Arab issues were also dealt with and included: Do you expect the situation of the Arab nations to be better or worse in the year 2010? Who will win the conflict between Iraq and the USA? If you were in Saddam Hussein's place, what actions would you take: Would you send the inspectors back or would you allow the inspectors? Would you resign or would you commit suicide? It is said that some of the Arab states will participate in the US attack on Iraq. Do you believe this? Israel and Iraq were also compared: A country that threatens its neighbors, violates human rights, and possesses weapons of mass-destruction: Israel or Iraq?

September 11th, Bin Laden and al-Qa'ida were also featured in survey questions: Following recent confessions, do you believe that Bin Laden is, in fact, responsible for the September 11th attacks? It has been one year since the September 11th attacks, who do you believe was responsible for the actions? Do you believe, at this time,

following the Afghanistan war, that al-Qa'ida is still a danger to US interests around the world? The US has offered 50 million USD for the capture of Bin Laden. If you knew where he was located, would you inform the US authorities?

Survey questions also revolved around the Palestinian Intifada: Two years of heroism and sacrifice- who can stop the Intifada: Israel, the Palestinian Authority, or the Arab states? Do you support Hamas and Jihad possibly accepting the idea of stopping the suicide attacks at this stage?

Surveys on Arabs⁴⁸ dealt entirely with Palestinian news and current affairs, such as: Do you believe that a new Palestinian government may open horizons for the Intifada? How, in your opinion, will the confinement of Arafat's headquarters end? Will Israel end the confinement as a result of pressure from the US or will Arafat flee?

Aljazeera.net's surveys dealt with a variety of pan-Arab issues, including: Will the US attack Iraq even if Saddam Hussein allows the inspectors back into his state? One year after the September 11th attacks, where do you think America wishes to direct the world? More wars, changing the world concept to the advantage of US interests, re-drawing the map of the world over again or achieving peace and security.

The Intifada as a pan-Arab issue was addressed: Do you agree with stopping the Intifada in a situation of the lack of a beneficial strategic plan?

Open Floors

The concept of the open floor was evident in some of the websites examined. The name interestingly varied from one site to another. Arabia.com called it "*al-salon al-siyassi*" (the political salon) and featured topics including: the abuse of human rights in Syria, Arab spies for Israel and if Arab political regimes understand what people suffer. The Ya-Hala website's open floor discussed reasons for Islam's (political and social) weakness, despite hundreds of millions of believers. The Arab⁴⁸ open floor presented the Intifada, conducting an evaluation of the two-year-old uprising.

Konouz.com's open floor, *Muntada al-Arab* (the Arab Open Floor), asked: Until when, Arabs? Questions following this included: Until when will you Arabs remain in a deep sleep?; How long will you stand by and do nothing about your wounded

Jerusalem?; How long will you remain quiet? This led to further discussion on the secretive, almost conspiratorial?, relationship between Arab and Israeli leadership, and the conspiracy between them against the Palestinian people and Yasser Arafat.

Al Jazeera.net's open floor, "*Muntadat al-Jazeera*" (al Jazeera Open Floor) covered the al-Aqsa Intifada: Where to? Leading to discussions regarding the merits (and otherwise) of the Intifada, suicide bombings, international sympathy and lack of, for the Palestinian uprising. The critiques lead to criticism of other Arab states, how some had banned public shows of support for the Intifada. Another open floor discussed the events of 9/11 and its implications. Discussions ranged from the deaths of innocent people, the damage it did to the Palestinian cause, the damage to Islam internationally, and the destruction it wreaked upon Afghanistan, to how it provided legitimacy for further attacks on Iraq. Another open floor discussion covered the issue of Arab Christians and their sense of belonging in the Arab world, which is overwhelmingly Muslim. Interestingly, this issue arose following the US-led 'war on terror' and whether it could be seen as a religious war or a cultural war. Another open floor focused on Arab leaders and, predictably, criticism of these.

Discussion rooms

In arabia.com there was a large and varied number of discussion topics, including "*Jordan shall free Palestine: Read and Weep*", critiquing how after four Jordanians were caught smuggling weapons from Iraq into Palestine, the authorities punished them. The discussions again lead to a critique of Arab regimes and how Jordan has treated other Palestinians. In another discussion, five participants discussed the marriage of the Prophet Muhammad to a child. Participants agreed and disagreed, while the actual level of argument was quite high.

An Arab48.com discussion revolved around suicide bombings in Israel. Participants agreed and disagreed with the acts. In a discussion forum found on aljazeera.net, a participant asked: "*What have the Gulf States done in the last fifty years?*" The discussion led to issues of underdevelopment and development.

Other participants debated a different track, arguing that different aspiring political groups work for the interest of the Western world, which attempts to rule by 'divide

and conquer'. The argument led to the presumptions of a plot – America and Israel control the world because they have financial means.

On the Arabian2000 website, one participant asked for “*solidarity on an issue revolving around a political prisoner from Egypt who is to be executed.*” The discussion room, in this case, was used as an alternative medium. In the same forum, another participant wrote a poem, which solely insults Arab leaders and regimes, using demeaning terms and names to describe them. One participant, who claimed to speak on behalf of the Iraqi Opposition, expressed his desire to see Saddam Hussein’s rule end, but not occupation by America. Another activist for an *Amazigh* (Berber) opposition group asked his/her fellow activists to be more organized. An Egyptian participant discussed a protest held in front of the Israeli embassy, bemoaning the participation of Islamist groups and divisions in Egypt’s opposition.

Discussion

Political Issues

As expected, the majority of discussions and polls are related to political issues. Political discussion itself is considered by Arab intellectuals as a main indicator for the creation of a public sphere, its flexibility, and openness. Here, political discussion implies the opportunity to publicly raise and discuss topics that pertain primarily to Arab regimes and leaders, particularly critiques. On a background of warm, unending support for Arab regimes by state-run press, the freedom to discuss these issues without surveillance, harassment, or imprisonment is particularly vital (Rinnawi, forthcoming).

Predictably, discussions were usually critical, detailed and often included the use of demeaning terms, which are usually prohibited in public, non-cyber debates. For example, on September 22nd on the arabia.com website, clips were shown detailing torture techniques inflicted on Rida Haddad, a Syrian political prisoner. Haddad described treatment of political prisoners in these prisons, something which has never been done before in Arab media. His account was presented as a three page letter, whereby he describes the various forms of torture – physical, spiritual, and psychological.

Arab state-regimes

Responses to Haddad's letter all attacked Arab regimes and their treatment of their own people. Each participant discussed a similar situation in his or her own country. That is, Egyptian participants discussed the case of Egyptian prisons, the Jordanians discussed Jordan's situation, and so on. Interestingly, responses were also divided into two groups. One group of participants based their disapproval on religious convictions; while others lamented the torture and noted the state's active hostility against its own people, rather than against Israel.

A loss of legitimacy marked most discussion regarding Arab state-regimes, even more so when discussing the Intifada, self-determination for Palestinians, participation in the US-UK war against Iraq. Language used and views expressed revealed a great deal of frustration, anger and disappointment and, as previously emphasized, a total lack of legitimacy. For instance, an open floor on aljazeera.net asked, "*Is there any betrayal Arab rulers and monarchs have not yet shown?*" One respondent replied, "*Is there any Arab who still listens to these traitors who call themselves the leaders of the Muslim community? These traitors are working on behalf of the Americans and the Jews and not for the Muslims.*" The majority of the responses were extremely similar to this one, and most often cursed the Arab rulers and monarchs, except for one, who stated "*The Arab rulers and monarchs are not responsible for themselves because America is stronger than they are and thus controls them.*"

Language was used as a tool of empowerment among the participants, radically changing adjectives ascribed to characters and events; thus, contesting meanings and hence, the legitimacy of Arab state-regimes and their media systems, who control *naming things*. Bin Laden, instead of being a terrorist, was called, by some participants, *Prince of Believers*; again instead of terrorists, some participants preferred the term Religious Soldiers for Islam; Arab leaders were called '*traitors*' rather than his/her highness/ the devoted, etc. One participant stated: "*Prince of Believers Usama Bin Laden, who defied the Americans after Arab peoples were defied and victimized by the Americans - has now defied them.*" Another participant referred to: "*The Islamic fighters Ramzi Bin Sheeba and Khaled al-Sheikh*" (two

primary figures in the Bin Laden network). Is this a translation? If so, try using “oppress” or “overpower” or “suppress” instead of “put down”

Notions of conspiracy

With little contention, many discussions raised, notions of conspiracy, whether through suggestions of secret cooperation between the late King Hussein and the Israeli leadership, as presented in an open floor on Arabia.com, or through claims that America and Israel were controlling the world. Others discussed the role of Arab spies for Israel. More than reviving old anti-Semitic notions of Jews and power, on some level the discussions appeared to attempt to rationalize powerlessness, disempowerment, non-engagement with political systems and possibilities for change.

Palestine and the Intifada

The Palestinian uprising remained a hot topic through this period, coinciding with the second anniversary of the Intifada. What was surprising was the level of criticism towards the Intifada. Its failure was attributed to different groups. On the Arab48.com, the issue was presented for participants to discuss and evaluate. Some participants argued that the Intifada succeeded – regardless of Israeli actions and reactions. Others accused Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian Authority as those responsible for the Intifada’s failure. Others pointed the blame at Arab regimes. On aljazeera.net, a participant stated, “*The Intifada showed the degree of frustration of Arabs and Muslims, and our disappointment in Arab regimes and the world community.*” Many responded to the sub-heading, “*It has shaken the basis of Arab regimes.*” “*The image of the Arab state was negatively changed in the eyes of Arabs and Muslims.*” Nevertheless, the majority came out in support of the Intifada, arguing that the uprising is the only way to shake Israel’s foundations. It was also seen as better than the peace process, which was considered a failure by those respondents. Other participants supported the Intifada because they believed it exposed the weaknesses of the Arab world, which had never truly challenged Israel prior to the Intifada.

In Arabia.com polls, browsers were asked, “*Two years of heroism and sacrifice, who can stop the Intifada, Israel, the Palestinian Authority, or the Arab states?*” Interestingly, most selected the PA and Arab states, not Israel. This indicates that

those browsers do not believe a military solution (imposed by Israel) can be found for the Intifada, or that Israel can impose a peaceful solution.

The differences between the arabia.com polls and the aljazeera.net polls indicated the willingness of participants to critique the Intifada and its relative failures, contexted in a regional/global framework of lack of support, etc; however, very few people were likely to argue that the Intifada's blood price had been wasted, and it was time to stop. Arab48.com asked, "*Do you support Hamas and Jihad possibly accepting the idea of stopping the suicide attacks at this stage?*" The question led to a discussion regarding the morality and tactic of suicide bombings as resistance to Occupation. One participant condoned suicide bombings as self defense against Israel's brutality, expressing his wish for Arabs and Muslims to wake up and arise against Israel. A respondent critiqued the tactic, arguing, "*Suicide bombings only harm Palestinians, destroy any hope of solidarity with the Palestinians, and place Israel in the role of the victim.*"

September 11th Attacks

A great deal of attention, debate and comment was received regarding *September 11th* and subsequent action against Afghanistan, Bin Laden, al-Qa'ida and Iraq. Unlike traditional Arab media outlets, which expressed sympathy for America and stood against Bin Laden, cyber discussions revealed support for *September 11th* and the al-Qa'ida leader. Arabia.com asked, "*Following recent confessions, do you believe that Bin Laden is, in fact, responsible for the September 11th attacks? and It has been one year since the September 11th attacks, who do you believe was responsible for the actions?*" Among the possible responses to this type of question, were those that assigned the responsibility not only to Usama Bin Laden and his counterparts, but also to "Jewish and Zionist" individuals – in fact, more than 1/3 of the 7,000 individuals who participated in this survey believed that Jewish or Zionist" individuals were responsible for the *September 11th* attacks. Support for Usama Bin Laden was also relatively high. An arabia.com poll asked, "*The US has offered 50 million USD for the capture of Bin Laden. If you knew where he was located, would you inform US authorities?*" Respondents were equally divided, with 50% saying they would inform and 50% saying they would not.

September 11th also brought into focus future American intervention in global affairs. Aljazeera.net asked, "One year after the September 11th attacks, where do you think America wishes to direct the world? To more wars, changing the world concept to the advantage of the US interests, re-drawing the map of the world over again, or to achieving peace and security". More than 55,000 people responded, with 60% agreeing with option one, and only 4% agreeing with the last option.

Nevertheless, there were mixed views regarding the events of *September 11th*, as indicated in an aljazeera.net discussion room on this issue. There was quite a substantial number of participants in this forum. One group expressed their horror at the events of *September 11th*, which led to innocent people being killed, caused damage to the Palestinian issue and Islam internationally, and led to the destruction of Afghanistan. Here is one example of a participant's response from this group: "Stop being proud of this 'accomplishment'. What accomplishment is that which you are proud of that takes over a civilian plane, murders the people on board, while killing other civilian workers in the process? Is this a human accomplishment?" This participant compares Bin Laden to Cohen in Syria, accused of being a spy by the US. The majority of participants expressed that they were against the US and supported Bin Laden. One stated, "I would like to thank and congratulate the Prince of Believers, Usama Bin Laden, who defied the Americans. After the Arab peoples were defied and victimized by the Americans, he has now defied them." Finally, there were those participants who did not support the actions of Bin Laden and who did not support the US, noting that the war on terror had objectives for economic, financial, and cultural global control. One participant wrote, "This is the beginning of the end...one will control over the rest of the world, this being America."

Iraq, the Arab world and the USA

Interestingly, by September 2002, Iraq was a contested issue and despite the assurances, vague or otherwise, of Arab leaders supporting that nation, participants in these websites believed otherwise. In an arabia.com poll, it was asked, "It is said that some of the Arab states will participate in the US attack on Iraq. Do you believe this?" More than half of those who responded answered in the affirmative.

Socioeconomic issues

Another topic rarely touched on in traditional Arab media is poverty. In cyberspace, this was a major concern for participants in the sites we reviewed. Specifically, participants focused on differences in socio-economic conditions in each state, revealing vast differences between the wealthy elite and the extremely poor. In an Arabia.com open floor, participants were asked, *"Does the political regime understand and is it aware of what we are suffering?"* One participant lamented, *"The ruler is god-like in his kingdom. He doesn't care about his people. For example, when the Egyptian President travels, his convoy closes many main roads and the soldiers or bodyguards will actually move cars themselves in a manner that causes damage. In such an instance, even an ill person does not have access to medical assistance."*

A Saudi participant sarcastically mentioned Prince Abdallah's visit to poverty stricken neighborhoods, *"The timing of Prince Abdallah's visit is odd and strange, as is the Saudi Arabian television's interest to broadcast this event several times in order to gain support amongst the poor for the ruling Al-Saoud family, especially following information presented by American media and the royal family's fear of revolution against its regime because of the injustice they carry out in Saudi Arabia."*

Sociocultural issues

While it is true that the topics that received the most attention and mention were of a political nature, there were other issues that received recognition as well. These topics were of a social-cultural nature. Amongst these was the issue of gender and sexual identity, primarily women's issues and issues concerning sexuality and relationships between men and women. While these subjects received attention and mention within the Internet, they did not receive any attention within the traditional Arab media.

Religious issues

While the Internet has offered possibilities for freedom of comment and speech regarding religion, unlike local and transnational media, which toes a careful, supportive line for (state-controlled) Islam, not one website suggested religious issues for discussion, nor were there any Internet polls regarding religious issues. Indeed, even aljazeera.net raised the issue of Arab Christians as a cultural/religious debate regarding the intentions of the US and the UK in the region. The issue was barely

controversial. A lone participant stated, *“All Christians and Jews should be forced to leave the Middle East because in a war of this nature they will return to their respective religions.”*

Only participants in discussion rooms could raise and debate topics surrounding Islam. Here the arabia.com discussion club can be noted, in which five participants discussed *“The marriage of the Prophet Muhammad to a child”*.

Other Issues

Other issues discussed on these Internet websites included critiques of the media, including the al-Jazeera transnational channel, on its sister website, aljazeera.net. One participant accused al-Jazeera television of *“...being supported by America and Israel so that they can use it as a channel for brainwashing Arab viewers and...fabricating truths in order to serve American policy.”* Censorship, as imposed by various Arab regimes on traditional media, was also discussed. The Internet was also used for lobbying purposes, advertising rallies, marches and conferences.

From the findings above it is evident that as expected, the most introduced and discussed topics were political in nature. These issues were considered the “sexy topic” for Arabs due to the lack of opportunity in the traditional Arab media to deal freely with this topic. The most introduced and discussed topic on the political level was Palestine and the Intifada, which was also considered to be the most important and discussed topic in the other transnational media, Arab satellite TV in particular, as was elaborated in different studies (Karram, 1999; Ayish, 2001; El Tounsy, 2002; Rinnawi, Forthcoming).

Despite the Internet’s being a relatively free medium and means of communication with anonymous access, religious issues were not very popular for discussion and remained sensitive issues. This was due to the religious and traditional nature of the majority of Arab societies and the significant role of religion in the daily life of most of the people in the Arab World, reflected in the traditional (Boyd, 1993), as well as the transnational, mass media (Ajami, 2001).

A comparison of the above findings with the the content of traditional Arab media in the Diaspora, such as the newspapers (Al-Hayyat, or Asharq Alawsat), indicates that despite the considerable degree of openness and freedom of expression which the Arab media in the Diaspora enjoy, a huge gap remains in the level of criticism, towards the Arab regimes and other elites in particular, existing in the Internet but almost non-existent in the Diaspora media. The same is evident concerning social and sensitive religious topics, in which traditional Arab media in the Diaspora still operate according to the “code of ethics” that the rest of the Arab media apply regarding these issues.

However, the gap is much smaller concerning the coverage of issues regarding Israel and the USA on a level of criticizing letters and the intensive coverage of the Palestinian case. Since one of the main “advantages” of the Arab media in the Diaspora is the privilege they enjoy, and continue to enjoy, in this field which makes them more attractive to the media consumers in the Arab World (Alterman, 1998).

Moreover, there are differences in language between both sources of media; the level of language employed in the Diaspora's media is much more conservative, moderate, and less provocative than that in the Internet (which is in itself a case study for another research).

However, in comparing the Internet with the other Arab transnational media (especially TV), it is evident that although there is some similarity in the topics raised, the way in which they are dealt with and the language used by these mass media are very differenet (Rinnawi, forthcoming).

Another interesting finding is that no differences were found between the two websites owned by Arabs from Israel and the rest of the websites that are owned by Arabs from the rest of the Arab World on any level or category except that they have more critical arguments on the intifada and the suicide bombings in particular, through their open floors.

Moreover, it was found that the discussion rooms on the Arab websites are often used, in this case, as alternative media, which replace the normal, or formal media in the

sense that they allow different groups (in opposition of one another) to use this medium to contact each other and to broadcast ideas to the public, for example inform about demonstrations, petitions or human rights violations committed by the Arab regimes.

From the above data, it can be argued that in circumstances of developmental and tribal media, such as in the Arab World, where the traditional mass media are controlled by the central regime and flow only one way (Boyd 1993), the Internet is a significant medium for expanding the public sphere. In this case, the inter-Arab discourse is altered by new positioning and new interpreters, despite the fact that it is still a tool of a particular elite, conditioned by available technology, access, language skills, and financial means. Additionally, the Internet is worldwide in its extent and rooted in a professional class that is not yet widely represented, but is uniquely positioned to leverage the techniques that can reshape Arab public sphere/s.

Furthermore, despite the unlimited borders of the Internet as a public sphere, in a sense it is worldwide; in the case of the Arab World, these borders are limited to the Arabic speaking population due to the language limitation and, more importantly, due to the issue of the Arabs' concern in the political, social, and cultural spheres

Therefore, the dynamics of the Internet have further created a shared, socio-political vision of the Arab world between individuals. This is happening both within the Arab world and through Arabs elsewhere, who can now 'enter' these forbidden borders. The Internet has provided an opportunity for an open exchange of ideas and aspirations between Arabs, including intellectuals from different parts of the Arab world, as well as Arabs in the Diaspora. This has led to the creation of a new generation of Pan-Arabism through the web. New Pan-Arabism on the Internet is not merely new interpretations, but also the presence of intermediate contexts that reflect a more nuanced diversity of views, settings, projects, and expressions of pan-Arabism today. This new pan-Arabism through the web is virtual.

On the other level, these developments initiate an enhanced desire and, perhaps, increased demands for democratization and openness on the level of the Arab nation-state, but, no less important, on the level of the entire Arab World. The basic technical

ability for equal access to other Arabs is significant, but more importantly, the basic ability and right for equal access to the Arab public sphere and the sharing of ideas has begun to be less a part of the Arabs' wishful thinking.

Meanwhile, it is important to consider two aspects. Democratizing of inter-Arab communication in the twenty-first century is closely related to the dialogue between people of the same culture. Moreover, this sort of cultural dialogue impinges on individual rather than governmental initiatives and is conducted through the effective use of the Internet.

Conclusion

The extent of the effect of the transformation of mass communication spurred by the creation and growth of the Internet is difficult to fully grasp. While the Internet has transformed mass communications, there is a plurality of opinion regarding the nature of the transformation and its repercussions on social phenomena. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that this new media source is influencing values and worldviews lying at the heart of Arab and Islamic cultures and societies (Anderson 2000, Wheeler 2001 and others). Consequently, the basic terms of reference concerning the use of media and freedom of expression have changed dramatically with the entrance of the transnational media, including the Internet, to the Arab World.

Bibliography

Ajami, F. (2001). What the Muslim World is Watching *New York Times*. NY, November 18th, 2001.

Alterman, J. B. (1998). *New Media New Politics? From Satellite Television to the Internet in the Arab World*.

Anderson, J. W. (2000). "New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere" in Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson (Editors) *The Internet and Islam's New Interpreter*.

Ayish, M. (2001). American-Style Journalism and Arab World Television: An Exploratory Study of News Selection at Six Arab World Satellite Television Channels In *TBS* no.7.

Boyd, D. (1993). *Broadcasting in the Arab World: A Survey of Electronic Media in the Middle East*. Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University.

El Tounsy, A. (2002). "Reflections on the Arab Satellites, the Palestinian Intifada, and the Israeli War" In *TBS* No. 8. Spring/Summer 2002

Karram, G. (1999). *Arab Media in the 21 Century*. Beirut, Lebanon.

Luke, T. W. (1998) "The Politics of Digital Inequality: Access, Capability and Distribution in Cyberspace" *The Politics of Cyberspace*, New York: Routledge.

Rinnawi Kh. (forthcoming) *Instant Imaginings: McArabism and al-Jazeera: Transnational Media in the Arab world*

Resnick, D. (1998). "Politics on the Internet: The Normalization of Cyberspace." *The Politics of Cyberspace*, New York: Routledge.

Streck, J. M. (1998). "Pulling the Plug on Electronic Town Meetings." *The Politics of Cyberspace*, New York: Routledge.

Toulouse, Ch. (1998). Introduction to *The Politics of Cyberspace*. New York: Routledge.

Warren, M. (1995). "The self in discursive democracy" in *The Cambridge Companion to Habermas*. Stephen K. White, ed. Cambridge University Press.

Wheeler, D. L. (2001) "The Internet and Public Culture in Kuwait," *Gazette*, Vol. 63 (2-3): 187-201.

www. Arab Advisors Group.com

www.Ajeeb.com.

^a www.Madar.org.

^b Much of the research conducted on Internet penetration in the Arab world is two to three years out of date. Our main sources for this section were the Madar Research Group, Ajeeb.com, and the Arab Advisors Group.

^c www.Madar.org.

^d According to a survey of home pages published in June 1997 by the Internet Society, 82.3 percent of home pages are in English. See www.isoc.org:8080/palmares.html.

^e See www.emirates.net.ae/rates.html.

^f Tunisia has enacted the region's most detailed Internet-specific legislation, which is, to a great extent, designed to ensure that online speech does not escape the government's rigid control on critical speech in other media.

^g The last two websites are Israeli Arab webs.

^h One of the websites does not have a current events poll.