

The Internet in the Arab World: Playground for Political Liberalization

ALBRECHT HOFHEINZ

After decades of political stagnation, in early 2005 new winds of hope were felt in the Middle East, accompanied by a new catchword making the rounds in the American media, »Arab spring.« The perfect embodiment of the new trend was seen in the popular demonstrations in Lebanon that helped to bring down the government and to force Syria to withdraw her troops. National elections in Iraq and local ones in Palestine and Saudi Arabia, or the change of the Egyptian constitution to allow more than one presidential candidate were other signs that change might finally be under way. The age of the old patriarchs, it appeared, was nearing its end. And the new media – satellite television, mobile phones, the Internet – were often regarded as having precipitated this development by undermining governments' hegemonic control over the flow of information. Not to forget, of course, external factors: supporters of the Bush administration maintained that it was US firmness and insistence on the values of freedom and democracy that was beginning to bear fruit.

Reform through Media

To those struggling for freedom and democracy in the Arab world, the debate on the relative weight of external versus internal factors in bringing about change is of great political importance since they have to ward off accusations that they are merely puppets of a neo-colonial, US-led enterprise, promoting imported »Western ideas« that threaten to corrupt the »authentic« values of Arab societies fighting for true independence and self-determination.

Secular optimists like the Moroccan sociologist Fatema Mernissi (www.mernissi.net) therefore celebrate the subversive power of the zapping satellite TV viewer and the civic openings created by the new »Sinbads,« as she dubs Arabs navigating the new frontier, cyberspace (Mernissi 2004). Mernissi rehearses the power of the word to vanquish the

ruler, the power of Sheherazade to prevail over the Sultan at last, which is also, not least, the power of women to change a male-dominated world. In seeking to uncover old, indigenous roots for such alternative discourses, she not only promises fresh legitimacy for civic action in the Arab and Muslim worlds, but encourages those who have not had a public voice before, the women, the young, the villagers, to speak up, and she holds out hope and faith for them to confront temporary setbacks. More than anything else, this is perhaps the attitude that best characterizes civil society activists on the Arab Internet today. Speak out. Don't let yourself be silenced.

But is this only a fairytale? Examples of hopes being shattered abound across the region. For example, Zouhair Yahyaoui »Ettounsi,« »the Tunisian,« who dared to speak out by publishing a webzine critical of the regime (www.tunezine.com), who was arrested and became the first Arab cause célèbre of Internet censorship, did not live to see his dream realized: he died of a heart attack on 13 March 2005, aged 36. He had »managed to open up a breach,« his supporters said – but the regime he struggled to overcome is still boosting what the BBC referred to as »one of the world's most sophisticated systems of Internet censorship.« In Syria, the president and founder of the Syrian Computer Society (scs) had been the focus of considerable hope concerning the liberalization of the political system when he followed his father onto the »throne« in 2000; now the scs (one of only two Internet service providers in the country) is better known for its complete lack of transparency in banning access to websites, and Syria is among the leading Arab nations as far as the detention of citizens in connection with Internet-related charges is concerned (Eid 2004).

Censorship Unable to Curtail Expanding Freedoms

Censorship remains a thorny issue in the region, although not all countries exercise it to the same degree. Various methods are used. Filtering and banning of certain sites deemed inappropriate for moral or political reasons is common in Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Jordan have decreased filtering, focusing on a few political opposition sites. Qatar filters only what it deems pornographic. Unfiltered access is available in Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Kuwait. In some cases (e.g.

Sudan, Yemen, Morocco), the cost of accessing the net has been so high for many years that it effectively limits Internet use to a tiny minority, although this is beginning to change. Even in countries that do not block access to sites deemed morally or politically unacceptable, however, Internet traffic is monitored by police and security organs. In the Sudan, for example, authorities only agreed to the introduction of the net (in 1997) after finding an arrangement that allowed the security services easy access to all traffic: Sudanet, initially the only Internet service provider, was half owned by the security agency (thus also providing it with an income), and in the beginning, users had to submit their passwords in clear form to the service provider and were not allowed to change them.

Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Tunisia exercise the most heavy-handed control of Internet traffic in the region, but even – or perhaps especially – in these countries, the net has proven to be a vital factor in opening windows and expanding the realm of what can be said in public.

Nevertheless, while censorship remains an issue of great concern, governments have not been able to silence the expression of dissent on the net and to prevent the increasing use of technology to strengthen communication and coordination among opposition and civil society activists. Banning access to certain sites serves to channel the mass of average users away from unwanted content; it does not hinder those who really want to communicate dissent since they can find ways to avoid official control with relative ease. The fear of reprisals may exist, but, as one human rights lawyer in the Sudan put it in an interview with this author, »the government knows what we think anyhow, so if they want to arrest us they do so whether or not we put our opinion out on the net, so we don't let that restrain us.«

Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Tunisia exercise the most heavy-handed control of Internet traffic in the region, but even – or perhaps especially – in these countries, the net has proven to be a vital factor in opening windows and expanding the realm of what can be said in public. Zouheir Yahyaoui opened up a »breach,« as we have seen; and even the strongest detractors of the government admit that the »Internet is the major window for Tunisians in a context of total lack of freedom of press and information« (Bensedrine 2005). The Syrian novelist and writer Ammar Abdulhamid wrote that despite the gloomy picture that still characterizes

the Syrian media, »in recent months there have been indications that reform-minded members of the regime are willing to allow the voicing of limited dissent in state-owned outlets,« apparently as an »extension of the regime's tolerance of Internet-based initiatives« – a policy that allows opposition figures to disseminate electronic bulletins even though public access to their websites may be blocked (Abdulhamid 2004: 15). It has also been observed in Saudi Arabia where newspapers have been allowed increasing room to criticize local administration and speak out on local issues, first in the wake of the spread of satellite TV in the early 1990s, and then following the introduction of Internet services in 1999/2000. A few years into this development, we have witnessed local elections in the country (10 February–21 April 2005), something unthinkable a decade and a half ago, and hopes are running high that women – whose public rights or lack thereof are increasingly the subject of debate in the media – will be given the vote by 2009.

A patient and educative approach characterizes the »Arab Decision« site (www.arabdecision.org) that seeks further transparency by making institutional information about the Arab world easily obtainable by citizens. If enough people are informed about what executive, legislative, judicial, administrative, economic, financial, educational, media, and civil society institutions exist in their countries, what their purpose is supposed to be, who is staffing them, what the background of these officials is, what the laws say, and so on, that will help empower people to act as citizens who know their rights and are able to demand them.

It is futile to debate whether such developments are due more to pressure from outside or from inside – a debate that for obvious political reasons rages heatedly in the Middle East. Change is always the result of the interaction between domestic factors and external influences. When in 2003 the US government launched the »Greater Middle East Initiative« for the promotion of democracy in the region, many activists were concerned that their age-old call for political reform in their countries was being hijacked by a superpower that for the better part of the twentieth century had been known for supporting, in the name of stability, the very regimes that symbolized the stifling of democratic movements, and that therefore the call for democracy was in danger of becoming stained even more than before as a submission to »Western« ideas and Western hegemony. In the end, however, the view gained ground that whatever the US agenda may be, civil society should not get discouraged, but continue to intensify its efforts to lobby for genuine reform. Thus, initiatives there are

in plenty, the will to expand the use of the Internet for educating the public is strong, international support for civil society development is forthcoming, and despite persistent efforts by states to monitor and curtail the free flow of information, they have not only been unable to suppress it, but in general have had to concede that their hegemony over communication is shrinking. The question now is: who actually has access to the Internet in the Arab world? And what do people actually do with the new medium?

Reach Still Limited – but among the Young, the Net Is Becoming a Fact of Life

By 2003, at least four percent of the population in Arab countries were using the Internet – around 11 million people.¹ In the fourth quarter of 2004, many Arab websites registered clear, exponential growth in access numbers, a development most likely linked to the increasing availability of broadband connections in Arab states. If the trend continues, we may expect 11 percent of the Arab population to be online by the end of 2006.

Geographically, Egypt and Saudi Arabia are the two countries contributing most to this growth. Currently, they make up over a third of all Arab Internet users, and use is expanding fast in both countries. The prominence of these countries, as well as the purchasing power of Gulf Arabs, very evidently shapes the content of what surfers of Arabic cyberspace are most likely to encounter.

Socially, the net in recent years has spread fastest among the young and among women. It is chiefly 20–30 year olds who use the net most avidly (their percentage among net users in 2003 was twice as high as their share of the total population); and those younger than 20 are the group growing most rapidly. In the UAE, half of the 15–24 year olds were said to be connected in 2004. Women, who in 1998 allegedly constituted only four percent of Arab net users, are meanwhile approaching the 50 percent mark.

Reliable data on income structure and education of users are barely available. Regular use, however, entails costs that most members of the lower middle class find difficult to justify. Together with a less developed

1. Data derived from International Telecommunications Union (ITU): Internet indicators, users and number of PCs, 15 March 2005 (www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics).

infrastructure in rural areas, this accounts for the fact that Internet use so far has remained strongest among urban, middle and upper class groups. Among the younger, educated elites, however, it is increasingly a fact of life. And while in the 1990s, the net was clearly limited to being a medium of communication of middle-aged professionals, it is today rapidly becoming a factor in the socialization of the young generation.

Where Do They Want to Go Today?

What do all these people do when they log onto the net? Patterns of popularity have remained relatively stable over the past five years for which statistics are available. Apart from purely instrumental sites such as search engines, directories, or software download centers, the net is consistently sought to satisfy the following needs (in approximate order of priority as reflected in overall traffic): facilitation and extension of social contacts (through e-mail and chat); provision of news from reliable non-local sources; discussion of most everything under the sun, but especially traditional taboo topics in the realms of religion, politics, and relations between the sexes; provision of moral guidance from what is perceived as a contemporary Islamic perspective on modern life; entertainment, especially music downloads, but also sports and gaming; guidance on how to live as a Muslim woman in the modern world, including answers to all »conventional« women's issues (beauty and fashion, cuisine, relationships, sex life, children, work and the family, and so on); match-making services; and business information.

As far as Arabic sites on the Internet are concerned, the most popular ones as of May 2005 are listed in Table 1. Data from other sources present a very similar picture. For example, the Saudi censorship authorities release monthly statistics of the sites most frequently accessed from Saudi Arabia, in which many of the addresses listed above reappear. Among other sites of evident popularity in the Kingdom are Mubasher.com.sa (real-time prices from the Saudi Stock Exchange), Elaph.com (a liberal pan-Arab electronic newspaper), Mufakkirat al-Islam (islammemo.cc, a jihad-oriented news portal), Multaqa al-Tarbiya wa'l-Ta'lim (moudir.com, a Saudi education portal).²

2. Internet Services Unit of the King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (www.isu.net.sa). For a more elaborate presentation, see Hofheinz 2004.

The fact that women and young people constitute an ever more important part of net users is clearly reflected in the traffic growth of sites serving their interests. Between 2003 and 2005, the steepest rise in popularity was recorded by Hawaa World, Kooora, Vip600 (a software guide), Amr Khaled, Maktoob, Tadawul, Arb3 (a portal and forum for women, on all aspects of married life), Alam al-Romansiyya (a »romantic« site for women, made in Saudi Arabia), Startimes2 (discussion forum of a satellite TV portal), Afdal 1000 Mawqi' 'Arabi (web guide), Fosta (entertainment site mostly for young males), Dalil MBC (web guide for young people, made in Saudi Arabia), Lakkii (a conventional site for women), Qassimy and Askhra (both general portals), Shabakat Oz (a Kuwaiti portal for young people, with music, chat, games, discussion boards, etc.), Bent el-Halal (a matrimonial site from Egypt with Islamic orientation), Google (both Saudi Arabia and UAE), Muntadayat Jawwal al-'Arab (forums for mobile phone users), and the music site 6rb.

Internet and Civic Mobilization: A Guarded Hope for Change

Given its growing reach, especially among the elites and the young, to what extent is the Internet changing the public sphere in the Arab world? How does it influence the media landscape in general? How does it help the work of political and civil society actors? And to what extent is it being used to mobilize citizens for civic action?

Journalists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were among the first in the Arab world to use the Internet professionally. Meanwhile, there is hardly any Arab newspaper that has not at least experimented with online content, and many of the larger NGOs have websites. In both cases, the net first and foremost has helped to facilitate and speed up communication with the outside world: NGOs began to rely on e-mail to contact and coordinate with mother organizations and put up web pages to attract donors; journalists started to use the web to hunt for information, access wire stories and images, and issue online editions of newspapers that are primarily read by national diasporas in the Gulf States, Europe, or America. As for reaching publics at home, the Internet lags far behind other means of communication. The online editions of national newspapers are hardly accessed at home, and for mobilizing internal support, NGOs and civil society groups rely on the telephone (especially mobile phones and SMS messages), the fax machine, and face-to-face contact

more than on the Internet. The reasons are not difficult to understand: Printed editions of local newspapers remain more affordable than online time, and Internet penetration of society is just not broad enough yet to justify, for most of the local groups, the effort and expense required by well-presented and well-maintained campaign sites. This may also explain why the presence of Arab political parties – both government and opposition – on the Internet remains weak on average. A few attempts at promoting e-government services are being made, with the most advanced example being Egypt, whose relaunched Government Services Portal (www.egypt.gov.eg) was sponsored by Microsoft and launched on 25 January 2004 in the presence of Bill Gates. Other countries such as Morocco (www.egov.ma) or Jordan (www.moict.gov.jo/MoICT/MoICT_e_Services.aspx) also developed e-government initiatives. For the time being, however, these remain at the pioneer stage, and when it comes to mobilization, SMS has far overtaken the Internet in reach – no wonder, as mobile phones are much more widespread than Internet use. SMS messages were instrumental in organizing protests against the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003 (the first mass street protests in Egypt since 1977 that were not arranged by organized political groups with official permission), just as they played a major role in the Lebanese demonstrations in spring 2005. Even governments have realized this potential. The Sudanese authorities had a text message sent to all subscribers of the monopoly, state-controlled mobile phone service in March 2005 to call for participation in public protest marches against the UN decision to ask the International Criminal Court to investigate allegations of crimes against humanity committed by Sudanese officials in Darfur. The success of mobilization via SMS clearly contrasts with the rather static appearance of the great majority of party websites, if they are maintained at all. In Morocco, an attempt was made to increase awareness of the 2002 parliamentary elections through the widely publicized website elections2002.ma, but this appeared more aimed at promoting the »modernity« of the country and the electoral commission than at providing much useful content.

Islamic groups, on the other hand, have clearly been more successful in their Internet designs than their liberal or secular counterparts. This began in the earliest days of the World Wide Web (1993), when Muslim student associations in America and Europe were quick to embrace the new medium to promote a global Islamic consciousness. Their mailing lists, an early example of news aggregators and widely read at the time,

Table 1:
The Most Popular Arabic Sites on the Internet, May 2005

| <i>Name</i> | <i>Description</i> | <i>URL</i> | <i>Established</i> | <i>Traffic Rank 03/04</i> | <i>Traffic Rank 05/05</i> |
|---------------------|---|-----------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Makroob | The first web-based e-mail service that allowed the use of Arabic (in addition to English). Established 1998 in Jordan. Became the most frequented website early on (in 2000, perhaps earlier). Had 1 million registered users in 2001; 3.5 in Nov. 2003; 3.9 in April 2005 – over a quarter of all users in the Arab world. Has added chat, e-cards, news, polls, shopping, and games to its offerings, but core remains web-mail. | makroob.com | Oct. 1998 | 1,405 | 134 |
| Google Saudi Arabia | The third Arabic interface page of the search engine Google (after google.ae and google.com.ly), established for Saudi Arabia in Aug. 2004. 23% of requests are for images (on the international Google.com these account for 8% (May 2005)). | google.com.sa | Aug. 2004 | – | 163 |
| MSN Arabia | Incarnation of the worldwide Microsoft Network portal site localized for users in the Arab world; in Arabic and English. Run by Microsoft together with LINKDOTNET, Egypt's largest Internet provider (over 40% market share), produced in Cairo and Dubai (Dubai Internet City). | arabia.msn.com | Sep. 2001 | 300 | 250 |
| al-Jazeera | Internet edition of the Arab world's most famous satellite TV station. News in Arabic and English. Streaming video and syndication services were made paid services after initial pilot projects. | aljazeera.net | Aug. 1998 | 575 | 332 |
| al-Saha al-Arabiyya | One of the oldest (since Apr. 1998) and best-known Arabic discussion forums, popular among all political persuasions. Also known for its chat rooms. Registered in the UAE. | alsaha.fares.net/alsaha.com | Nov. 1996 | 1,519 | 352 |

| <i>Name</i> | <i>Description</i> | <i>URL</i> | <i>Established</i> | <i>Traffic Rank 03/04</i> | <i>Traffic Rank 05/05</i> |
|-------------------------------|--|-----------------|--------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Mawqif al-Ustadh Amr Khaled | Site of the pietistic preacher Amr Khaled, born in Egypt and living in London, who is especially popular among the young. With highly frequented discussion forums (drawing 44 % of total traffic in May 2005; > 193,600 members, up from >76,800 in Nov. 2003). | amrkhaled.net | Jan. 2002 | 4,595 | 389 |
| Google.ae | Google's first Arabic version. | google.ae | ? | 3,145 | 473 |
| al-Ahram | Internet version of the grand old lady of the Egyptian press with, i.a., the second largest Egyptian daily, the English-language Al-Ahram Weekly and the French Al-Ahram Hebdo. | ahram.org.eg | ? | 1,085 | 505 |
| 6arab.com | RealAudio files of popular Arabic music. | 6arab.com | Apr. 1999 | 1,538 | 589 |
| Gawab | Web-mail service (established in Egypt, but with customers world-wide). | gawab.com | Mar. 2000 | 2,446 | 597 |
| Hawaa-world | Portal for women, conventional outlook. Based in Saudi Arabia. By far the most popular service is the discussion forum (May 2005: 124,000 members, up from 43,000 in Nov. 2003) | hawaa.world.com | Sep. 2000 | 17,874 | 781 |
| Tarab | Music portal. | 6rb.com | Aug. 2002 | 4,591 | 798 |
| Jeeran | »Arab Web Hosting Community«. Hosts private homepages, communities, etc. | jeeran.com | Jan. 2000 | 3,131 | 926 |
| Tadawul: Saudi Stock Exchange | Financial market information from Saudi Arabia. | tadawul.com.sa | ? | 7,773 | 1,003 |
| Koora | Soccer portal. | koora.com | Sep. 2002 | >20,000 | 1,007 |

Source: The »traffic rank« in this table is taken from Alexa.com.

were one factor helping to strengthen identification with the struggles of Muslim communities in Kashmir, Bosnia, Chechnya, Palestine, and other places that became focal points for the development of the idea that armed struggle, or jihad, was necessary to defend Muslims against outside aggression. Meanwhile, with web technology more advanced and the use of Arabic no longer a problem, web-based news portals have taken up the torch. The most successful of all jihad-oriented news sites is »Mufakkirat al-Islam« (islammemo.cc), founded at the beginning of the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003. With the fight for Faluja in November 2004, IslamMemo was able to overtake in popularity the older Moheet.com, a populist portal appealing to Islamic and Arab national sentiments that had been established in 1998 by the Dubai-based Almotahida Group (arabia-inform.com) and is produced in Egypt. Al-Mukhtasar li'l-Akhbar (almokhtsar.com), founded in November 2002 by radical Wahhabis opposed to the Saudi regime, but not openly agitating against it, is the second jihad news aggregator that figures among the top 100 most popular Arabic sites. However, conservative Islamic sites that toe the line of the Saudi government continue to attract significantly more visitors than the jihad pages, especially al-Khayma al-Arabiyya (khayma.com), one of the first Arabic web directories (est. 1999), and its affiliates, the portal Raddadi.com and the Wahhabi missionary site Said al-Fawa'id (saaid.net).

Of course, Islamic extremists also use the Internet to communicate, often via Yahoo! groups and similar electronic communities that are as easily abandoned or migrated as they are created. Some, such as the »Global Islamic Media« group, have attracted considerable attention in the West, not least because a strategy paper suggesting a terrorist attack in Spain to influence the elections was published there three months before the Madrid attacks.³ However, the membership of these groups ranges between a handful and a few hundred at most. They cannot therefore be regarded as mass platforms but must be understood as forums serving internal communication between insiders already converted to a cause. Similarly, websites established by militant Islamists abound, but they are constantly on the run from clampdowns, and are therefore only able to

3. Al-Hay'a al-'Alamiyya li-Nasr al-Sha'b al-'Iraqi: 'Iraq al-jihad: amal wa-akhtar <http://www.mil.no/multimedia/archive/00038/_Jihadi_Iraq_Hopes__38063a.pdf>; Brynjar Lia and Thomas Hegghammer (Forsvarets Forskningsinstitut): FFI explains al-Qaida document, 19 March 2004 <<http://www.mil.no/felles/ffi/start/article.jhtml?articleID=71589>>.

reach a devoted few who have to follow their tracks on electronic bulletin boards. One of the more persistent examples is »Dalil Meshawir« that appears in many flavors and at many different addresses, among which meshawir.cjb.net has been open for quite a while at the time of writing.⁴

Whether in Islamic or in secular terms, Arab Internet users maintain a keen interest in political developments and express a strong wish for political reforms and greater public participation. News sources that are respected as more reliable alternatives to state controlled local media are consistently popular. Online versions of printed newspapers have been relatively less successful than Internet-only publications. The first of these, the decidedly liberal Elaph.com, in early 2004 overtook the most widely respected of the international Arabic daily newspapers, al-Hayat, in popularity among Internet readers and in April 2005 became the leading news site accessed from Saudi Arabia, ahead even of Aljazeera. Other purely electronic newsreels followed, like al-Qanat (alQanat.com), Middle East Online (middle-east-online.com), and the Palestinian Donia al-Watan (alwatanvoice.com), all secular in outlook.

While the wish for greater popular participation in decision-making is certainly great, a large part of Arab Internet users remain skeptical regarding the short-term likelihood of seeing real political change. Both hope and realistic skepticism can easily be gauged from among the thousands of online polls that every decent Arab site has put up for the last few years, and that yield surprisingly consistent results. Internet users see their regimes glued to power for the sheer love of it and due to nepotism and the fear of being held accountable by democratically legitimate successors. At least before the US invasion of Iraq, they blamed their own repressive governments much more than outside interference for the weakness of democracy in the region (Hofheinz 2004: 468–9).⁵ And this long-entrenched experience easily explains the skepticism among Internet users regarding an »Arab spring.« »Does the uprising in Lebanon ring in a new age of popular uprisings in the Arab world?« asked Aljazeera.net on 5 March 2005. The response was weak (only 3,452 votes) and divided:

4. The Israeli »Internet Haganah« (haganah.org.il) has made it its mission to document the »global jihad online,« and maintains an extensive »database of jihad sites,« often being instrumental in their demise.

5. For a sample of online polls, see Hofheinz, »Tabellen zur Internetnutzung und Internetumfragen in Nordafrika, Nah- und Mittelost,« pp. 11–27 (<http://www.mena-vision2010.de/dokumente/tp4-auszuege-drei.pdf>).

55 percent did not believe in such an outcome, while 45 percent thought it would occur.⁶ Regarding the necessity of external pressure to strengthen internal reforms, Arab net-citizens are similarly uncertain. At the end of March 2005, Aljazeera.net asked if the US invasion of Iraq had been necessary to push the Arab world in the direction of reform and change. Where tens of thousands otherwise condemn the US occupation, only 2,793 votes were cast in this poll of which, interestingly, a third agreed with the proposition. The poll was later pulled from Aljazeera.net's archives.

Specifics of Internet Use in the Arab World

In international comparison, Arab Internet use is first and foremost very similar to worldwide patterns in that the expansion and facilitation of social networks, information, and entertainment are ubiquitous goals that the net helps to satisfy. But two features are characteristic of the Arabic corner of the Internet as it presents itself today. First, religion has a greater weight than anywhere else in the world, and secondly, Arab users are particularly eager to engage in discussion – not least of politics, religion, and sex. In both domains, a growing assertion of the individual as an active speaker and decision-maker, not a passive recipient of authoritative discourse, is apparent. Let us look at both aspects in more detail.

Religion: I'm a Maker, Not a Taker

About 8–10 percent of the 100–200 most frequently visited Arabic web-sites have a decidedly religious (and in this context more specifically: Islamic) character, a phenomenon not observable in other languages, including Persian and Turkish.⁷ By far the most popular sites, however, are

6. <http://www.aljazeera.net/gateway/vote>, voteID=1024. Compare this with another poll in February 2005 in which almost 200,000 people participated, 78 % of whom supported an immediate Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon (voteID=1014). In September 2004, 65 % of 62,000 had expressed their support for such a withdrawal (voteID=901).

7. In Persian, only one religious site makes it into the top 100 most popular: the Islamic library Howze-ye 'Elmiyye at hozeh.tebyan.net, at position 91 in May 2005. Next in popularity was the anti-Shi'ite Iranian Sunni League (www.isl.org.uk), at position 105. None of the top 100 Turkish sites are of an Islamic character.

not the militant ones, but those promoting a moral renewal of the individual, based on the Qur'anic injunction that »Allah will never change the condition of a people until they change themselves.«

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Foremost among them is the site of Amr Khaled, a pietistic preacher born in Egypt in 1967 who in recent years has developed a huge following first in his home country and then in other Arab states, and especially in the 15–24 age group where, as we have seen, Internet use is growing fastest. In mid-2004, Amr Khaled's site (AmrKhaled.net, est. 2002) overtook the much older IslamOnline.net (est. 1997) as not only the leading Muslim site on the Internet, but as the most popular religious site worldwide. [IslamOnline](http://IslamOnline.net) was inspired by Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a preacher also from Egypt whose roots lie in the Muslim Brotherhood and who became extremely influential in the 1990s through his regular program on Aljazeera satellite television. Amr Khaled also appears on satellite, through the Saudi-owned [Iqraa](http://Iqraa.com) and ART stations. His success – his followers can buy t-shirts with the imprint »I'm a maker, not a taker« – perfectly embodies the spirit that attracts young Arabs on the Internet and far beyond: »Amr Khaled has started a new movement that none of the traditional Islamic and non-Islamic leaders ever thought of. [...] You could actually feel the vibes and the buzzing of over a hundred thousand Arabic youths visiting Amr Khaled's website. For those youths have been given what they have been denied for many years[:] a belief in their abilities to change and to act. [...] True change came into existence, not by restricting thought and forcing direction, but by accepting accountability and believing in one's ability. [...] They are fed up with the traditional political and religious disputes, and are not willing to waste any more time arguing.«⁸

8. A phenomenon called Amr Khaled. The Muslim Association of Britain (<http://www.mabonline.net/islam/personalities/articles/amrkhalid.htm>, accessed on 23 April 2005). See also Wise 2003. The popularity of Amr Khaled's site has also attracted people disseminating propaganda in favor of al-Qa'ida on the forums, but they remain a clear minority.

It is interesting to note how change here is regarded as having really come into existence, even though one might argue that no substantial change has taken place on the political level. Amr Khaled in fact studiously avoids talking about politics, especially domestic. The change that is considered here is a change of personal attitude and belief, and it is first acted out virtually, on the forums, where everyone can have a voice and everyone is empowered to speak. But the fact that the »Amr Khaled phenomenon« is not devoid of political implications and may threaten established power hierarchies was demonstrated by the Egyptian government's decision to ban him from public preaching in 2002 – following which he went into exile and started his website.

Discussion Forums and Blogs: I Want my Voice Heard!

Internet discussion forums are the second characteristic of Arab cyberspace. No other language group debates as avidly on the Internet as Arabic speakers. One of the oldest (est. April 1998) and still most popular forums is al-Saha al-Arabiyya (literally, »the Arab forum,« alsaha.com). Swalif.net (est. Aug. 1999) and Arabsgate.com (est. July 2000) are two other sites that have been much frequented for years. There exist hundreds of dedicated discussion sites (in November 2003 I counted over 750 active ones, of which about 60 were high frequency), but forums on portal sites such as Amr Khaled, IslamOnline, or Hawaa World also play a very important role. Apart from socializing on the forum and exchanging the latest news on mobile phones, computer games, sports, music, and film, the hottest topics of debate are politics, religion, and relations between the sexes – the three big taboo issues in public discourse in the Arab

The Internet has proved an ideal medium for breaking the limitations traditionally imposed on who is allowed to speak in public, and what it is proper to say or even think regarding the social, moral, and political orders.

world. Participants reflect all shades of political opinion, and especially in the years 2000–2002, when the medium was novel, outright »wars« were fought on many forums between Islamists and their »secular« or »liberal« opponents (terms often used interchangeably in this context to denote people opposing, at least to an extent, the use of religion in politics). After

the novelty had worn off and many of the original participants became tired of »flaming« and endless repetition of statements, often without reasoned exchange of arguments, a certain disillusion set in, and many old hands withdrew. They were quickly replaced, however, by new and younger members, often from the age group that as we have seen is the fastest growing on the Internet, those below 25, who clearly express the same interest as the pioneers in marking their presence, participating, and making their voice heard. The Internet has proved an ideal medium for breaking the limitations traditionally imposed on who is allowed to speak in public, and what it is proper to say or even think regarding the social, moral, and political orders.

Interestingly, the phenomenon of blogging reached the Arab world comparatively late. Blogs (web logs or diaries kept mostly by individuals) began to take off in the West in 2001 and soon also became an extremely important feature of Persian Internet use, among others. Iranians at home and abroad used blogs not only to publish information critical of the regime after the crackdown on the liberal press in Iran, but also for expressing themselves on personal, social, and cultural matters and building a virtual home for themselves where they were in control and could nurture an intimate community of friends. But even though one of the most famous bloggers of all, Salam Pax, was an Arab (he chronicled his life in Baghdad from September 2002 to August 2004),⁹ and a few other blogs were published from the Arab world before 2004 (mostly in English), it took some time for the movement to catch on. By the turn of 2005, however, frustrated with the often uncivilized tone in the discussion forums and the occasional censorship exercised there, and aiming to be master in their own house, Arabs began increasingly to »say good-bye« to the forums, announcing they would henceforth concentrate on blogging. Abdallah al-Miheiri from Abu Dhabi was the first to publish a blog in Arabic (serdal.com); he is credited with having come up with the accepted Arabic translation of »blog« (*al-mudawwana*). Arab blog rings and aggregators were set up to network the community (for Egypt, compare egyptbloggers.com and manalaa.net/cgblogs; for an attempt at listing

9. »Where is Raed?« (dear_raed.blogspot.com). This was partially published in book form by *The Guardian*, which had contracted Salam Pax to write a weekly column after the Iraq war (Salam Pax: *Salam Pax: The clandestine diary of an ordinary Iraqi*, London 2003). Following its huge success, the first year of another English-language Iraqi blog (riverbendblog.blogspot.com) also appeared in print: Riverbend, *Baghdad burning: girl blog from Iraq*, New York 2005.

all Arabic language blogs, see arabblogcount.blogspot.com), and even the idea of an Arab »Bloggers Union« was launched to represent the »new cultural movement.«¹⁰ The first annual Best Arab Blog Awards were voted for in February 2005, and the press began to write about the phenomenon. The US charity »Spirit of America« that seeks to promote »freedom and democracy« in Iraq and Afghanistan discovered the power of blogs and helped to develop a tool to allow blogging in Arabic (apparently unaware that this had long been possible on blogspot.com and other platforms); it is hosting blogs from Iraq at friendsofdemocracy.net. The majority of Arab bloggers are as critical of outside interference, however, as they are of their own regimes. In Egypt, many bloggers support the »Kefaya« (Enough!) movement (harakamasria.com) that opposes a fifth term for president Mubarak or the succession of his son Gamal, and seeks genuine democratic reforms in the country.¹¹ Whatever the outcome of this political power struggle, 2005 is set to become the year in which Arab blogging appeared on the scene with a vengeance as a new medium embraced by many to assert themselves in public. As »Big Pharaoh« (bigpharaoh.blogspot.com) characterizes his site: »Hi, I am from Egypt. This is my first blog ever. I would like to use it in making my voice heard. I hope you enjoy the stuff!«

The socialization that they experience online, through surfing and choosing as well as through participating in public debate, familiarizes users more than is the case in close-knit traditional communities with the concept that people have different opinions, that one's own views are not necessarily self-evident to all, that one has to find arguments to justify one's beliefs, rationalize them, and accept (if grudgingly) that one will not be able to convince everybody.

This is the attitude that best characterizes Internet users in the Arab world: increased self-confidence and belief in one's own potential (identification, if playfully, with the »Big Pharaoh«), becoming active, making one's voice heard, intensifying and enlarging one's social networks around common interests, having fun, overcoming negativity, creating

10. Mashru' insha' niqaba li'l-mudawwinin (<http://www.getphpbb.com/phpbb/view-forum.php?f=1&mforum=naqaba&sid=8068b76a5f37c38883d617920a893c83>).

11. See, e.g. Al-Wa'y al-Misri (misrdigital.blogspot.com).

something useful – to repeat the motto on Amr Khaled’s t-shirts: »I’m a maker, not a taker!«

While net users become more self-assertive, they also become more selective about »what I really want.« The socialization that they experience online, through surfing and choosing as well as through participating in public debate, familiarizes users more than is the case in close-knit traditional communities with the concept that people have different opinions, that one’s own views are not necessarily self-evident to all, that one has to find arguments to justify one’s beliefs, rationalize them, and accept (if grudgingly) that one will not be able to convince everybody. The loss of self-evidence of traditional worldviews and power hierarchies leaves the individual not autonomous, but certainly more exposed and conscious of his individuality, and more distinctly aware of the role of choice in creating social communities, knowledge, and values. This has led, for example, to a growing fragmentation of discussion forums – if I don’t like the one I’m currently in, I migrate and create a new one. On the religious level, we can observe a growing assertion of expressions of »my Islam,« meaning my own individual understanding of what Islam really means, as opposed to traditional or current views held by others, be they popular preachers, government-paid scholars, extremist fanatics, or the misguided masses.¹²

Generational Change rather than a Revolution

To recover space for the private, the un-political, is a goal of civil society not only in Iran, where a well-informed observer concluded that such private dynamics, entrenched by demographic developments, may turn out to engender more deep-rooted change than direct political action (Kermani 2001, also Koch 2004). The Internet is one factor that in tandem

12. »Islam NEVER said that I support a Moslem in his evil doings. At least MY Islam never said that.« »You mentioned Sh. Qardawy’s statement. Who is Sh. Qardawy? Isn’t he one like many others, since we have no clergy in Islam?« (»Sameh Arab« <s-arab@menanet.net>, postings in Focus on Egypt <<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/free-voice>>, 14 & 15 Sep. 2001). »Subject: THIS IS MY ISLAM!!! / what is real islam / salah we soom we zakaah? / dazn we gallabeyya we sewak? / dah el zaher bass / lakin min gowwa eeh??? / islam to me is: – enn beta3 el fool ya3’sel eedo abl ma ya3mil akl lel nas ...« etc. (Wael Abbas <waelabbas@hotmail.com>, former_internet_junkies @yahoogroups.com, 25 February 2003).

with others (satellite TV, youth culture, and the »globalization« of consumer products, social networks, and ideational configurations) is creating a dynamic of change that is helping to erode the legitimacy of traditional authority structures in family, society, culture/religion, and also the state, and thus creating pressure for reform. Slowly and not without setbacks, but in the end inexorably, young people are claiming »private« spaces of freedom that are influencing their social attitudes. In the face of this process, ideas on the relations between state, society, and the individual that may have been generally accepted for generations are changing, and the Internet is the medium where such change is often most vigorously expressed.

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