THE FUTURE OF BLOGGERS IN THE ARAB REGION: A STEP TOWARDS ELECTRONIC DEMOCRACY

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**The Future of Bloggers in the Arab region: A step Towards Electronic Democracy**
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Web logging has become an effective tool for Arab citizens living under controlled regimes, to express themselves and reveal public grievances. This new technology has made it possible to do virtually what on cannot do physically in Arab countries where freedom of expression is constrained. However, this freedom did not come without a price; governments, feeling threatened, started cracking down on bloggers.

**Research statement**

The increasing number of bloggers using online blog in the Arab region has become a real phenomenon that needed to be dealt with as it could take the Arab nation a step toward electronic democracy. Despite all limitations, this shows the potential for democratization that the Internet has to offer. Bill Gates, 1996, quoted that “personal computer connected with interactive networks will provide citizens with the opportunity to participate easily and immediately in democratic process”.

**The research problem**

One particularly controversial aspect of this topic is the development toward global information society and its social and political ramifications. The internet allows easy access to the information supplied by other countries. This not only has educational and commercial effects but also politically controversial in countries with limited freedom of speech. Many of the problems connected with the north-south differential in information technology are apparent in the Arab region. However, the level of development cannot be assumed to be homogeneous, as individual countries differ in their educational standards, financial strength, and willingness to innovate. The level of political acceptance of the new medium also varies. As a result, some relatively wealthy countries with a large high-tech potential only have a few Internet ports, whereas the number of users is growing much faster in other, structurally weaker countries.

Based on the differences in infrastructure and political situation, the Arab world can be divided into the zones with differing degrees of development: the North African countries, the Arab heartland: Levant and Egypt, and the Gulf countries.

**Political Dangers**

Many blogs provide commentary or news on a particular subject, thus, blogging can sometimes have unforeseen consequences in politically sensitive areas. Since blogs are much harder to control than broadcast or even print media, many authoritarian regimes often seek to suppress blogs and\or punish those who maintain them.

**Research question**

Could censorship techniques work on a long- term basis, given the fact that it requires close observation of all the internet ports in a country, which again is only possible if the number of users is very limited?

**Methodology**

The recent development of the network communication and its sociopolitical consequences has stimulated researchers, writers as well as academic and research centers to organize seminars for discussion. The purpose of this paper is of two folds: First, is to highlight and to compare among the main findings of the research works and studies that tackled the new media and the phenomenon of weblog and bloggers. Second, it investigates the abilities of the o weblogs and their users in non-Western democratic regimes, as in the Arab countries, to practice freedom of speech and to develop new means and ideas for changing the existing sociopolitical as well as their economic reality. Despite the censorship and restrictions that can sometimes escalate to exercise repressive methods against the users (bloggers) number of weblogs is increasing particularly those concerned about political reforms.

**Introduction**

**Globalization and the innovation of Information and Communication Technology**

“We are creating a world where anyone anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity”-

(Barlow 1996 - Founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation)

The innovation in Information and Communications Technology (ICT) is changing the world around us. In the past few decades, several communicative mediums were invented and lots of ponderings and discussions revolving around their democratic potential have erupted. It all began with the invention of the radio in the 1920s and seventy years later, the internet drew a lot of attention as one of the most powerful inventions of the digital age. At present, there is no doubt that the world is entering a new age of information access and news dissemination made available by the internet. After all, the internet is an open medium that allows the free flow of information and ideas across the globe, thus empowering freedom of expression and exchanging of information. Yet, this potential means that the internet is posing a significant threat to governments which are continuously seeking tough and serious measures to control and restrict one of the basic human rights: The right to freedom of expression and opinion.

The above statement taken from “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace”, a charter released by John Perry Barlow, founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), a US based non-profit advocacy and legal organization working to protect freedom in the digital world, appears to be the general consensus that the internet will bring enormous changes and help promote free speech and democracy across nations. This might stand true for most countries around the globe but, unfortunately and sadly enough, not for all. The current situation faced by Internet users in the Arab world in specific, casts doubts upon the existence of the Barlow’s declaration.

The most striking features of the Internet are the spontaneous, unofficial representation which encourages additional participants to join on their authority and interests plus ability to use the technology. Such a feature provokes high expectations for democratic development. However, what perspectives, what political, economic, and cultural advantages do the “information age” offer the Arab societies?  Will access to the network of networks take these societies one step farther on the way to democracy and free access to information, or will it foster the development of information elite on a regional as well as an international level?

Given the fact that the differentiation between the North and the South countries in the access to basic resources and infrastructure for network technology , as well as the differentiation between the metropolis and small cities, the overwhelming majority of the developing countries’ populations are excluded from the opportunities offered by network communications. The general social conditions (e.g., illiteracy and lack of resources, contribute to this fact In the 90s according to a German study indicated that about half of the internet is used commercially, and that this percentage is increasing. (Boldt 1977)

**Development of the Network Communication**

**in the Arab World**

Many of the problems connected with the north-south differential in information technology are apparent in the Arab region. However, the level of development cannot be assumed homogeneous, as individual countries differ greatly in educational standards, financial strength, and willingness to innovate. The level of political acceptance varies. As a result, some relatively wealthy countries with a large high tech potential only have a few internet ports, whereas the number of users is growing much faster in other structurally weaker countries, another reason for these discrepancies among the Arab countries in the heterogeneity of the infrastructure necessary for data communication.

Based on the differences in infrastructure and political situation, the Arab world can be divided intro three zone with differing degrees of development: the Maghreb countries, the Arab heartland, and the Gulf countries. The result of this study supported the fact that heterogeneity exists among countries in the same region, for instance, in the Maghreb or north Africa Tunis and Morocco are highest in terms of access to internet, while Algeria though it is an oil producing country and suppose to possess financial strength access to internet is rather limited. As for Libya and Mauritania access to internet is rated very low.

**Who are the Bloggers**? Demographic coding indicates that Arabic bloggers are predominantly young and male. The highest proportion of female bloggers is found in the Egyptian youth sub-cluster, while the Maghreb /French Bridge. Syrian clusters have the highest concentration of males.

**On “Mapping the Arabic Blogsphere”: Politics, Culture and Dissent**

A study undertaken by a group of researchers in Berkman centre for Internet and Society at Harvard University highlighting the place of Egypt in the Arabic blog sphere, the study explores the structure and content of the Arabic blogosphere using link analysis term frequency analysis and human coding of individual blogs. The study identified a base network of approximately 35000 active language blogs discovered several thousand Arab blogs with mixed use of Arabic, English and French, created a network map of the 600 most connected blogs with, and with a team of Arabic speakers hand coded over 4000 blogs. The goal of the study was to produce a baseline assessment o the networked public sphere in the Arab Middle East, and its relationship to range of emerged issues, including politics media, religion, culture and international affairs.

**A country-based network: Arabic blogosphere is organized primarily around countries.**

Egypt is by far the largest cluster and includes several distinct sub-clusters, on which is characterized by secular reformist bloggers, and another by members of the Muslim Brotherhood, a group that is technically illegal in Egypt Egyptian bloggers comprise the largest structural cluster in the Arabic blog spheres due to its largest population compared to Arab country. Marc Lynch argues that Egypt has some of the most active political bloggers in the Arab public sphere, that is, bloggers who are connected to political movements are actively engaged in politics. The findings of the Berkman centre seem to support this argument, especially in the Secular Reformists and the Muslim Brotherhood clusters. Egyptian bloggers frequently use political badges on their sites to show support for various campaigns, such as for freeing bloggers, calling for reform, or promoting social issues such as combating HIV, AIDS stigmas. Some of these campaigns like «stop the curse», organize some groups of bloggers against others. In fact, Egypt is the one national grouping where we see evidence of the kind of large scale political clustering found in the United States and some other politically active blogospheres as Iran. Egyptian bloggers comprise nearly one-third of those in the Arabic map and form a large structural cluster that contains several attentive clusters, including secular reformists, wider opposition youth, Egyptian Islamic and Muslim Brotherhood.

Saudi Arabia comprises the second largest cluster and focuses more on personal diaries and less on politics than other groups.

Kuwait, this cluster is divided into two sub-clusters based on bloggers’ language preference, splitting those that write primarily in English from those that use Arabic. Both groups focus heavily on domestic news and politics, though the Anglophone bloggers are more likely to advocate reform and discuss economic and women’s issues.

Levantine/ English Bridge, this groups of bloggers is located mainly in the countries of the eastern Mediterranean sometimes referred to collectively as the Levant, including Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan and Syria as well as most bloggers from Iraq. They are joined in this section of the network, which connects to the US and international blogosphere.

Syria, this cluster features frequent, though often mild; criticism of domestic leaders and both includes Arabic language bloggers with closer links to those in Saudi Arabia, and English language bloggers closer to those in the Levantine / English Bridge region.

Maghreb/ French Bridge is a group comprised of a cross national set of bloggers located mainly in Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria. Many of these bloggers write in a mixture of Arabic and French. They are found mostly among the religious focused bloggers.

Islam-Focus, this cluster is a loosely connected set of bloggers from various Arab countries who are focused mainly on Islam, mixing personal theological and political topics.

**Common Issues of Discussion among bloggers**

**A-Personal life and local Issues**

In September 2008, a national survey undertaken by the (IT) Information technology centre sponsored by the Egyptian cabinet was set to investigate the opinion of the youth about the different usages of the internet. According to the preliminary sample of 1833 individual’s age from 18 to 35 years old, the result was that 73% of this sample group use the internet mostly to follow up the news; 68% use the internet for entertainment; 63% use the internet for communication purposes through e-mails. As for the web logs Egypt’s contribution amounts up to 230 thousands according to the statistics of 2009 by the CAPMAS (The Centre for Population and Mobilization Statistics) in Egypt which represents 30% of the total web logs in the Arab world.

**B-Discussion of the United States**

The United States is not a dominant, political topic in Arabic bloggers, neither are the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Most discussion of the United States is in the English Bridge and Syrian clusters, and when the United States is discussed it is usually in critical terms.

**C-Muslim Brotherhood**

Although the Muslim Brotherhood is technically illegal in Egypt, it has a very active presence in the blogosphere. The late Nagib Mahfouz, the Nobel laureate, once said: “if you want to move people, you look for a point of sensitivity, and in Egypt nothing moves people as much as religion”. It continues to move the social and political mechanics of the people, the future of Egyptian politics and the consciousness of our nation’s bloggers alike. As in most of the Arab world faith and politics are very much intertwined in Egypt and the impact of the two stretch far outside the countries own borders encouraging those in the diasporas. Like other Egyptian political bloggers, Brothers’ bloggers, talk about human rights and defend those who have been arrested by the government. They are also engaged in public debate about organization’s future and priorities. This debate is mainly between the older establishment leaders and younger reform minded members, but there is also engaged in public debate about the organization’s future and priorities. This debate is mainly between the older establishment leaders and younger reform conservatives pushing back against the latter.

**D-Terrorism**

This issue is a bigger issue among Aventine / English Bridge and Syrian bloggers than others, where it is not a major issue. Across the map however, when discussing terrorism, Arab bloggers are over whelming critical of violent extremists. We consider this a positive finding. Although qualified because the issue of attitudes toward terrorism hinge on the interpretation across the Arab World. Whatever its presence in other less public online venues, overt support for violent global confrontation with the west appears to be exceedingly rare in blogs, however, it is not unusual to find blogs that criticize terrorists on the one hand, and praise Hamas or Hezbollah for fierce resistance to Israel on the other. This complex issue merits additional research.

**E-Human Rights and culture**

Human rights civil and political rights are also a popular topic of conversation across the Arabic blogosphere- much more uniformly common that discussion of western culture and values which is concentrated mainly in Levantine/ English Bridge cluster. Among culture topics, poetry, literature and art are more popular across the board than pop culture.

Most of the writings of the bloggers concentrate on personal, diary-style observations. Those that write about politics tend to focus on issues within their own country and are more often than not critical of domestic political leaders. Foreign political leaders are discussed less often and most commonly in terms more negative than positive. Domestic news is more popular than international news among general politics and public life topics, especially within large national clusters writing entirely in Arabic. The one political issue that commands the most attention of bloggers across the Arab world is Palestine and particular the situation in Gaza.

Research on blogs in the Arab world is scarce as blogging is considered a new phenomenon to the Arab public. Examining the existing literature on internet in general and blogging in specific, one notices that it has been written from a western point of view by western analysts and researches where blogging has a different purpose since the right to freedom of expression is granted and enjoyed by citizens, unlike the situation in the Arab world where this right is not fully practised and valued by governments. Because there never was a public forum in the Arab world that specifically served to help average citizens practice and bolster their right to freedom of expression, which “remains a dream in most of the Arab world” (Mostyn 2002:159), blogging has become an essential communication strategy for many frustrated Arabs. Citizens in that region are thrilled to set up their own blogs primarily to overcome corrupt political practices introduce social and moral ideals.

Obviously, it would be fair to presume that the internet, given its free nature, will be act as a remedy to authoritarianism. Nonetheless, one should be aware of what (Kalathil and Boas 2003: x) describe as “blind optimism” since the internet certainly threatens and challenges authoritarian regimes. Posusney and Angrist (2005: 2) show pessimism concerning any democratic transition in the Middle East in the near future and note, “what distinguish the Middle East are not simply the phenomenon of enduring authoritarianism but rather the density of it and the absence of a case of successful democratization”.

Scanning the different Arabic blogs, which are scattered on the web, it may seem easy to generalise that in that part of the world, where authoritarian regimes control, blogging is mostly identified with politics, democracy and free speech. Yet, while the majority of the literature has doubted and denounced the internet’s role in democratisation, other scholars stress that the internet has constituted a public space for free discussion and has therefore proved efficient in promoting democracy.

No doubt that the increasing usages of the internet in the Arab countries signalled social and political awareness particularly among the young generation.

**Blogging and Arab governments**

Blogging is new in the Arab world that the parallel term in Arabic, tadween (to chronicle), was coined only in 2006 (Ambah 2006). “There are almost 40000 Arabic blogs out of the 37 million on the internet” (The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information 2006) and although most of them were created in 2006 with the aim of creating a more democratic system, their power and popularity have exceeded all expectations.

Scanning the Arabic blogosphere, one notices that a large portion of the bloggers are political activists, journalists, and other politically influential elites who are setting up their own political blogs in order to, not only let their voices and thoughts heard, but also to play an active force in changing the democratic status in their countries. They cross red lines, challenge the taboos and risk their lives by writing about sensitive issues and even filling streets protesting events, at a time when criticising the government and defending their rights out in the open is improper. Tarawneh (2005:74) reveals that in the Arab world no tool has ever existed before to share ideas, to form a position, to organize a move, or simply to live a democratic life, therefore, blogging is “regarded one of the few truly democratic forms of expression in the media and are a good opportunity especially for younger people to explain their views and attitudes”.

Since the internet “enable people to be active in the political realm” (Street 2001: 212) and promises the dawn of a new political age at a time when traditional media, suffering from censorship, have the capacity to distort the truth and present a biased picture of political issues, blogging has made it easier for people” to look elsewhere in their search for the truth” (Mostyn 2002:34) and express themselves to a potential audience of millions. Bloggers who are politically active, flock to the internet, free of all constrains and engage freely with fellow activists to achieve a particular goal. They enjoy being politically active online, expressing opinions and planning campaigns at a time when acting on the ground is hard and risky. McCaughey and Ayers (2003:71) call this participation “online activism” where members of the virtual communities “take advantage of the technologies and techniques offered by the Internet to achieve their traditional goals”.

Unfortunately and despite the internet’s democratic potential and people‘s hopes, this online freedom, in most Arabic countries is costing bloggers their “offline freedom”. Bloggers there are being silenced, imprisoned and tortured by their governments for uncovering corrupted practices and discussing religious and political matters interpreted by these governments as threatening. Ravetz (1998:117) stresses, “with the growth of the internet, nations are looking for effective laws and technical means by which to regulate the subject matter of the Internet, just as they have consistently done so with other communications tools; radio, television, newspaper and the post”. However, Hofheinz (2005) reveals that governments will always fall behind technological innovations when trying to control those technologies since “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”. In addition, Schultz (1985 cited in Rawnsley 2005: 180) points out that governments when feel challenged and threatened “try to stifle these technologies and thereby fall further behind in the new industrial revolution, or else they see their totalitarian control inevitably eroded”.

**Democracy in the information age**

There is an ongoing debate surrounding the definition of “democracy”. Mill, N.D. cited in Deegan 1993:1) notes that the obvious and common definition is “the government of the whole people by the whole people, equally represented”. Schmitter and Karl (1996:50) offer a wider definition by referring to basic principles of democracy: “Modern political democracy is a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their elected representatives”. However, the above two definitions lack reference to certain factors that must exist for government to be described as democratic. Dahl (1982:11) lists several “institutions” that citizens should join, namely, the right to free expression without the government punishment and the right to look for other sources of information.

Without a doubt, “democracy and communication are necessarily linked” (Kedzie 2002:107). Communications has the power to increase people’s access to information, freedom to know, share and discover. However, no matter how much differences exist when identifying democracy, Sreberny (2001:104) connects the notion of democracy to that of development by pointing out, “While there is clearly much debate about definitions of democracy, there is increasing agreement about that need for greater participation, growth of civil society and development of human resources as part of the development process”. Agreeing with Sreberny (2001), Lipset and Sargent (cited in Kedzie 2002:107) reveal key principles that define democracy. They include “citizen involvement in political decisions, equality, civil liberties, representation, and majority-rule”.

But, what about information technology, particularly the internet, and its role in achieving democratisation? What vision of democracy is going to emerge from the information revolution? New terms such as “digital democracy”, “electronic democracy”, and “cyber-democracy” referring to the marriage between technology and democracy as working closely together and mutually reinforcing each other have emerged recently. But, is there a link between Information Technology and democratic improvement? Kedzie (2002:108) points out “communication via the internet and associated media breeds efficacy”.

The term electronic democracy or cyber democracy describes democracy taking place online. Hacker and van Dijk (2000:1) note that people flock to the internet in an “attempt to practise democracy without the limits of time, space and other physical conditions using ICT [information and communication technology] or CMC [computer-mediated communication] instead, as an addition, not a replacement for traditional ‘analogue’ political practices”. This type of digital democracy allows citizens living in non-democratic systems to meet online and deliberate major policy issues and therefore create an attentive public since the internet “allows a higher level of interactivity than traditional mass media” (Van Dijk, 1997 cited in Hacker and van Dijk 2000:50), allowing, consequently, for communications to take place through computer screens and electronically mediated interchanges instead of face-to-face interactions. This advantage made possible by digital democracy, is expected to strengthen civic engagement and political activism forming an “interactive democracy which can be described as a group of citizens whose matters of common concern are dealt with through ongoing discussions, debates and deliberations” (Gibson, R. K. et al. 2004:99).

Other authors have long argued that it will be instrumental in the transition of authoritarianism to democracy as it provides ordinary citizens with political resources and opportunities to expand their political participation in a democratic environment. Porebski (2002:1220) notes that e-democracy is “the remedy for democracy crisis”. In other words, e-democracy is regarded as the evidence of the crucial role of the ICT in overcoming the democracy crisis.

No wonder, this convergence between information and technology has the ability to revive and foster democratic deliberation among citizens in what Frantzich (1999) calls “citizen democracy”. Rheingold (1996) notes that this citizen-based democracy is able to amplify the power of grassroots groups to organise political action and sway public opinion.

The internet was embraced by the globe as a new tool for free speech against oppression and authoritarian control as it offers unlimited and uncensored amount of information. Nonetheless, when discussing the internet’s democratic potential, researches and scholars split into two groups; those who foresee a bigger role for the internet and those who are pessimistic concerning any democratic change. Many scholars of Middle Eastern studies assume that the power of the web will enable citizens in the region to establish more participatory political climates and freer flows of information. Anderson (1999:52) reveals the importance of the internet in Arabic countries by describing the internet as a “fast and flexible, not least for providing opportunities for alternative expressions, networking, and interpretations that draw on and extend its technologies”.

Given that freedom of expression is controlled in most of the Arab world, Sreberny (2001:116) reveals that the internet is always able to facilitate this freedom despite all restrictions since “the net facilitates individual and small-group participation, connects groups to each other, crosses boundaries of national space and gender although it can create its own, new, boundaries as well”. Therefore, “notions of democracy, civil society, press freedom and human rights are being articulated as never before”. Furthermore, Norton (cited in Sreberny 2001:105) reveals that giving importance to those rights in the Arab world emerges from the fact that the internet and the way citizens are using it, is threatening governments, “…there has long been little doubt that the regimes in the region are under increasing pressure from their citizens. Repression at the hands of the state has become a topic of public discussion, and human rights, activists, though relatively few in number, have become increasingly vocal. In short, the regime’s governments, especially the Arab ones, are facing persistent crises of governance… the pressures for change is general and growing, although they are obviously not equally intense in all states”.

Castells (2002:2) argues that the Internet and its associated technologies will contribute to the end of information control and will witness the beginning of an exhilaration era for citizens living under repressive regimes. He puts it this way:

“The Internet is a communication medium that allows, for the first time, the communication of many to many, in chosen time, on a global scale. As the diffusion of the printing press in the West created what MacLuhan named the “Gutenberg Galaxy”, we have now entered a new world of communication: The Internet Galaxy”.

Edelman (2004) a researcher studying internet filtering warns against increasingly sophisticated methods for Internet censorship employed by authoritarian states:

However, Kalathil and Boas (2003) warn that technology alone cannot accomplish miracles and that the Internet itself “is not inherently a threat to authoritarian rule” (2003:136). They suggest that the Internet may be mostly a facilitator for pro-democracy work in other areas, rather than playing the lead role itself. The fact that authoritarian states control the pace and the nature of the Internet’s diffusion within their borders should not be overlooked.

Needless to say, some people never believed in the most exaggerated expectations of the Internet. Lessig (1999) argues that governments can most certainly regulate the Internet, both by controlling its underlying code and by shaping the legal environment in which it operates. Winston (1998) in Media Technology and Society: from the Telegraph to the Internet is convinced that “beyond the publicity, the Internet was just another network. This is to say its social effects could (and would) be as profound as, for example, those of the far more ever-present network, the telephone. The Internet is nothing but another chapter in the long history of electronic systems of communications. Besides, Castells (2002) is not blind to the fact that even though the Internet contains the potential for the democratisation of information, this does not mean that it is an inevitable result of the ongoing development in a given country. He points out: “At the dawn of the twenty-first century there is an unsettling combination in the Internet world: pervasive libertarian ideology with increasingly controlling practice. In other words, “global networks cannot be controlled, but people using them, can, are, and will be – unless societies opt for the freedom of the Internet by acting from and beyond the barricades of their nostalgic libertarians“(2002:183-84).

In summing up, this section reveals that the window of opportunity Internet provides is perhaps not as wide-open as was hoped for in the early years. But, there is still enough room for change to slip through. Castells (2002:171) says it well: “It is a contested terrain, where the new, fundamental battle for freedom in the Information Age is being fought”.

Egypt as a Case Study: the changing political background in Egypt and Control of the internet in Egypt

“The effects of the revolution in ICTs should not be limited to achieving economic and developmental gains. They should be extended to strengthening political, social, and cultural links among nations to bring about world peace based on justice, equality, and… supporting national efforts toward more freedom, democracy, and respect of human rights” -

(Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak at The World Summit on the Information Society 2003).

It is ironic how the above statement by President Mubarak contradicts an assertion made by the chairman of the Information Centre in the Egyptian Cabinet, Mr. Rafat Radwan, in which he states, “Net cafes must be monitored. Any activity has good and bad elements. There should be several restrictions such as a central control on material sent through the Internet that could be against Egyptian principles. The Vice Squad in the Ministry of the Interior should play a role in monitoring these net cafes” (Islam Online 2000).

On 26 March 2007, the Egyptian government held a referendum to make some 34 amendments to the constitution aimed at, as justified by President Mubarak, “increasing democracy in the country which he has ruled unchallenged for a quarter century” (The Associated Press 2007). The central issue in the amendments was the banning of political parties based on religion, which many suggest is a direct attempt to prevent the Muslim Brotherhood from ever taking power constitutionally and therefore to strengthen President Mubarak’s grasp on power. Amnesty International, a Non Governmental Organisation (NGO) working to promote respect for human rights around the world, stresses that the amendments are “the greatest erosion of human rights in Egypt” (Amnesty International 2007).

**The case of the Egyptian blogosphere**

In 2004, a movement called the Kifaya National Movement for Change was formed in response to the constitutional referendum. Kifaya (Arabic for enough), is an all-purpose message to President Mubarak: Enough of a presidency that has endured 24 years and that would be extended by six if he chooses to present himself for re-election; enough of the president’s manoeuvring to place his son Gamal in position to succeed him. The Egyptian bloggers played a big role in the movement’s success by taking part in covering all of its activities and providing press coverage that domestic and international media did not provide.

The country’s control practices are a concurrent example of how technologies are leading to restrict further the freedoms of Egyptian citizens. Those to defy the Egyptian government and push at the limits of freedom of expression in a way that has alarmed the authorities were accused no less than being criminals and were sentenced to jail. In a report by the Non Governmental Organisation, Human Rights Watch (2005) entitled “False Freedom: Online Censorship in the Middle East and North Africa“, the NGO reveals that the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly in Egypt continues to be restricted. Also, Egypt has been added to the list of “13 Internet Enemies” which Reporters without Borders issued in November 2006.

**Web logging in Egypt**

The Egyptian blogging community, available at the Egyptian Blog Ring www.egybloggers.com, Egyptian Blogs Aggregator http://www.omraneya.net/, The Arab Blog Network www.itoot.net, Jeeran Blogs www.jeeran.com/blogs, Bloggers without Borders http://www.dwwen.com/, and Maktoob Blogs http://www.maktoobblog.com/, is one of the most active blogging communities in the Arab world housing thousands of fast-growing blogs. Bloggers in Egypt are making use of the freedom made available electronically by playing a double part; as citizens discussing matters of concern such as governmental and political issues, and as a threat to the Egyptian government.

Marc Lynch (2007) stresses that in Egypt, “Blogs have played an important role in historically unprecedented bouts of political activism in recent years”. However, political blogging can be extremely risky in Egypt since activists use their blogs for political organization and campaigns, using blogs to mobilize for contentious politics. Arresting bloggers has become a frequent procedure recently, particularly for bloggers who attempt to cover the political scene in Egypt. A number of bloggers were being imprisoned in Egypt during the past few years in what Amnesty International calls “a slap in the face of freedom for expression in Egypt” (Amnesty International 2007). The first blogger who dared to post a photo of a torture incident was Alaa Abdul Fattah. He posted the photo of a State Security officer known for torturing people in police stations. Alaa was arrested during a peaceful protest and was jailed for 45 days but his arrest spurred a protest by others around the world, some of whom created a new blog, “Free Alaa” http://freealaa.blogspot.com.

In February 2007 another Egyptian blogger, Abdul Kareem Nabil Suleiman, who blogs under the name, Kareem Amr, was also detained by the public prosecutor and expelled from Al-Azhar University, the main state-run institution of Islamic higher education, because of his writings on his blog karam903.blogspot.com. His sentence is the first in Egypt in which a blogger is imprisoned for his writings online. Abdul Kareem was sentenced to four years in prison for insulting religion and defaming President Mubarak, in addition to announcing himself as a secularist. A campaign blog, “Free Kareem” http://www.freekareem.org/, was also set up calling for his release. In another incident, on 15 April 2007, blogger Abdul Monem Mahmoud who blogs at “Ana Ikhwan” http://www.ana-ikhwan.blogspot.com, Arabic for I am a brother, was detained for 45 days for “belonging to an illegal organization”, the Muslim Brotherhood, “creating and possessing images destructive to public order”, “organizing secret meetings with the aim of disturbing public order”, “disparaging religions” and “insulting President Mubarak” (Reporters Without Borders 2007). The Egyptian blogosphere and activists rallied to his defence in an impressive way and launched the “Free Monem campaign” available at [http://freemonem.cybversion.org](http://freemonem.cybversion.org/). www.dwwen.com/ and Maktoob Blogs http://www.maktoobblog.com/.

**Blogging for a cause: Reform**

“Computer-mediated communication and networking is a useful mechanism for disadvantaged groups in their efforts at collective action and empowerment” (Mele 1999:292). Almost all of the Egyptian bloggers including human rights activists interviewed state that their main goal for setting up blogs is to rebel against the regime with the aim of making a difference in Egypt. They hoped that, by blogging about matters of concern, they would empower citizens, make them aware of problems within the system, and direct their attention to basic human rights, which they have been deprived of and motivate them to take action. Ahmad Mahdi, a human rights activist in Egypt explains,

“Bloggers in the Middle East, especially in Egypt, are indeed a vital player in revealing corruption, dictatorship and torture”. He asserts his point of view by quoting The Economist which calls bloggers “pyjamahideen“ because “they are ‘mujahedeen’ fighting for freedom of expression, using their personal computers in their bedrooms while wearing their pyjamas”.

Through blogging, blogger Hady, who blogs at “Afkar Da Vinci”, Arabic for Da Vinci’s ideas http://afkar-davinci.blogspot.com, adds

“I share my thoughts with the hope to make a difference [in the Egyptian society] and promote people’s awareness”.

Dalia Ziada, a young human rights activist and a blogger herself who blogs at http://daliaziada.blogspot.com about human rights values, labels blogging as the most influential form of writing to shape people’s minds in countries where free speech is suppressed. She reveals,

“The state of freedom of expression in Egypt is getting worse one day after the other. My Ultimate goal in this life is to bring peace and justice to the world by changing the mentalities of the people and blogging has given me a good opportunity to achieve this goal”.

This valuable opportunity to express ideas and opinions without having to worry about someone looking over your shoulders is the driving force behind blogger Mohammed El Sharkawy’s interest in blogging. Mohammed was arrested in April 2006 and was released on the 23rd of May to be arrested again two days later upon his participation in a demonstration in front of a Cairo court. He was accused of “illegal gathering” (in violation of the emergency law), “obstructing traffic”, “insulting President Mubarak” and “insulting police officers during his arrest”.

In an interview with the Deputy Editor of The Daily Star Egypt, Mohammed who blogs at www.speaksfreely.net stresses

“As a citizen journalist, I want to be part of an alternative citizen media that will be a headache for the regime. I want to say that we are watching, participating and writing what we experience with no ulterior motives“(Malky 2007:7).

The above examples demonstrate that blogging, despite all obstacles, has proven useful in triggering and encouraging a collective action among the Egyptian blogging community. By setting up a healthy and free-thinking environment, citizens were made aware of problems surrounding them, encouraged to express their anger freely and for the first time ever challenge the government. Blogging helped Egyptians rebel and evolve.

Moreover, blogs have also opened an unrestricted space where activists can give account and testify events that go unreported by the state-run media, hence proving to be an eye-opener to influence citizens. In his blog, http://malek-x.net/, Malek Mustafa, a blogger who witnessed and published a post on the event of the sexual harassment of women in Cairo in summer 2006, reveals that this incident was met with zero coverage in the press. Malek explains,

“One of the things I believe bloggers like me have achieved is creating a new breed of citizen journalists who communicate what they witness like any correspondent” (Al Malky 2007:1).

Another female blogger, Ethar Ahmad, who blogs at “Without Masks” http://infinite-grief.blogspot.com, agrees that blogging is

“An act of writing what you want, whenever you want with the aim of revealing lots of secrets and videos of torture taking place in Egypt”.

“Speaking my mind out loud” is what Loay, a twenty year old blogger who blogs at “Poles Apart” http://polesapart3.blogspot.com/, hopes to achieve through blogging. He stresses,

“State controlled media in Egypt is less reliable in reporting certain issues as they only show the good part; whereas blogging allows for clear and real explanation of stuff”.

In accord with all views, blogger Mohamed El-Gohary who blogs at “Politikia and the Society” http://politikia.blogspot.com/, clarifies,

“I blog for rebellion and creation through publishing some uncensored articles which the magazine he used to work for said they were not suitable for publishing”.

**The government’s crackdown**

Ferdinand (2000) explains that when messages spread via the internet, it becomes difficult for governments to stop them; therefore, they try to control the internet in every possible way. This battle, on the one hand, is challenging the notion of blogging as a tool for free expression while on the other hand, many bloggers especially those who were threatened by the government, admit that Egypt benefited from this censorship in other ways. Egyptian bloggers taking part in this battle are determined more than ever to win the on going fight. Commenting on the current pessimistic situation concerning free expression in Egypt amid those arrests, Dalia Ziada seems very daring and defying when showing that government’s arrests will always prove unsuccessful in silencing bloggers. She reveals,

“On the contrary, the internet provided and still providing an unlimited amount of freedom to its users and accordingly to the whole society. Through blogging we were able to express bold ideas and discuss thorny issues and communicate with international supporters. Ibn Rushd, [who was an Andalusian- Arab philosopher, also known in European literature as Averroes], said once that no one can control words or ideas. That was in his age. So, do you think that any one can restrict ideas in the age of IT and globalization? Of course not. The government is using repression and censorship for our own. I mean we as bloggers benefited from this. The more repression the government does, the more new young people join the blogosphere and the more we got international support”.

“There are tens of thousands of programmers around the world who are programming solutions to that problem right now”.

Those statements are clear proof that blogs are indeed a fast-growing cell, multiplying in numbers and their influence is spreading quickly. Even if governments attempt to arrest bloggers or block blogs, they will always be faced with an increasingly serious challenge that they will find hard to counter effectively. What those opinions show is that governments are fighting a losing battle as many web-savvy surfers find ways around the system in order to access blogs.

What bloggers are trying to demonstrate is that they can break a story days before the press takes it on. For example, Reuters might have some photos of an incident, but not a full story, and Al Jazeera for example, might not be present, so blogger accounts are critical to spreading Information.

**The future of blogging:**

Supporting the idea that citizen interaction in cyberspace had the potential to affect both the formation of public opinion and the conduct of democratic politics” (Margolis and Resnick 2000:100), Ahmad believes that blogging is having a democratic effect,

“I expect that these blogs would be one of the factors which can contribute to greater democratisation as the people become more aware of the problem of their country and more willing to pressurise for more democratisation”.

Hady assures bloggers that the democratic impact of blogging is growing especially with the introduction of other types of blogging such as photographs (photolog), videos blog, which will reinforce that influence:

“Bloggers did not stop there with textual posts. They took a step further to the streets, acting as citizen journalists by publishing pictures and videos, thus proving that the government’s crackdown on blogs is one major proof of their rising influence”.

The above is clear evidence that no matter what the government does in order to block blogs and arrest bloggers, bloggers will always find a way to interact freely and spread their influence through the seemingly only available way to express opinions.

**Conclusion**

“Freedom is participation. Freedom is distribution. Freedom is interaction. Freedom is the ability to influence and be influenced. Freedom is the ability to change others and to be changed as well”-

(Balkin 2004)

Ten years ago, weblogs were born and in no time, their craze reached the Arab world. Making use of the presumably free flow of information on the internet, citizens living under Arabic authoritarian regimes, particularly in Egypt and Jordan, were thrilled by this new electronic medium where they can bypass restrictive policies and engage each other in discussion, share opinions and get their voices heard.

Attempting to answer the research question put forward in this study, it is clear that while blogging is gaining clout and appeal among frustrated Arab citizens, the inevitable regime crackdown has followed. Governments felt threatened and obliged to police the cyberspace and punish bloggers who are critical of the government, regime and religion.

The key element of this study came throughout a number of interviews with bloggers and human rights activists from both countries. By tackling each country on its own, this research reveals the number one goal behind blogging in Egypt which can be best summed up in one word: “Reform” by reaching out to Egyptians and reminding them of their rights which are overlooked by the government. Moreover, this dissertation demonstrates that government crackdown will never succeed in silencing bloggers. On the contrary, bloggers take government reaction as a motivation keep up their work in revealing injustice especially those who were jailed.

As for the relationship between mainstream media and blogs, the study shows that Egyptians find blogging more reliable in that matter as they seek to tell the truth and this is a sign of credibility. While Egyptian bloggers seem very defying, determined and optimistic concerning blogging and its potential democratisation, the study shows that very few Jordanian bloggers foresee a positive future for blogging in enhancing freedom of expression despite the online freedom they enjoy. They do not favour discussing politics or blog about the government out of fear and therefore they seek self-censorship to avoid trouble although they do it unwillingly.

Regardless of the differences, the most substantial finding of this study proves that bloggers’ practices on the net contain the growing seeds of important transformations in two ways: First, by warning, arresting, jailing bloggers and blocking, deleting blogs, governments playing two paradoxical but interlinked roles at the same time which, unintentionally, cultivate a climate, proving that blogging is indeed a step forward towards democracy and freedom. In this regard, one cannot help but think that governments are fighting a losing battle. Secondly, blogging, taking its free nature, allows a continuous free flow of opinions and bold ideas and opening discussions on issues of concern. Accordingly, the river of information can never stop and when all these blogs are linked and networked to each other and bloggers coming together in cyberspace and produce voices on the Internet, a culture of democratisation is sure to emerge”.

Arab Governments should stop wasting time and resources cracking down on bloggers and should focus more on the benefits they can gain from blogging. If governments combined forces with bloggers, they will be more likely to have a social and political impact in the society.

The study concludes that blogging contains the growing seeds of positive transformations in regard to democracy and freedom of expression in the Arab world. It also suggests some recommendations for Arab governments in dealing with free expression as a fundamental human right. No doubt that the new media facilitates communication without being subject to geographical barriers, that is why the young generation are attracted to it use not only for entertainment This media is becoming useful for disseminating fanatic ideologies that threaten the stability of the existing political regimes particularly in countries of patriarchal nature as the Arab states. This new media is very influential due its quick communication potentials yet many researchers are worried whether this new media could eliminate the gap between those who know and those who do not know and lack the access to such a media, or will it lead to information elite?

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**مستقبل مستخدمي مواقع الانترنت في المنطقة العربية  خطوة باتجاه الديمقراطية الالكترونية**

أصبح استخدام المواقع الالكترونية أداة فعّالة للمواطنين العرب الذين يعيشون في ظل أنظمة حديدية للتعبير عن أنفسهم ولكشف المظلمات. هذه التكنولوجيا الجديدة مكّنت الأشخاص من القيام بالأمور بشكل رقمي، أي بواسطة الكومبيوتر والانترنت، بدلاً من القيام بالأمور مادياً أو جسدياً في البلدان العربية حيث تعتبر حرية التعبير مقيّدة. إلا أن هذه الحرية لم تتحقَّق من دون ثمن إذ أن الحكومات التي شعرت بالتهديد بدأت باتخاذ إجراءات صارمة ضد مستخدمي المواقع الالكترونية.
أصبح العدد المتزايد لمستخدمي المواقع الالكترونية في المنطقة العربية ظاهرة حقيقية تستدعي التعامل معها إذ أنها قد تأخذ الأمة العربية باتجاه الديمقراطية الالكترونية.
على الرغم من كل التعقيدات، يظهر هذا الواقع الإمكانية التي يمكن للانترنت توفيرها في مجال التحول نحو الديمقراطية.
العام 1996 صرّح بيل غيتس نقلاً عن أحدهم «أن الكومبيوتر الشخصي الموصول بشبكات تبادلية الفعل تمنح المواطنين فرصة المشاركة بسهولة في العملية الديموقرايطة».
أحد المظاهر المثيرة للجدل في هذا الموضوع هي التطور نحو مجتمع  المعلوماتية الشاملة وتشعباته الاجتماعية والسياسية. ويسمح الانترنت بالولوج السهل الى المعلومات التي توفرها بلدان أخرى. هذا الأمر ليس له تأثيرات تجارية وتعليمية فحسب وإنما تأثيرات مثيرة للجدل سياسياً أيضاً في بلدان حيث تعتبر حرية التعبير محدودة. العديد من المشاكل المرتبطة بالتباين بين الشمال والجنوب في مجال تكنولوجيا المعلومات ظاهرة في المنطقة العربية إلا أن مستوى التطور لا يمكن الافتراض بأنه متجانس إذ تختلف المستويات التعليمية بين البلدان وكذلك القدرات المالية والرغبة في الابتكار كما يتباين مستوى القبول السياسي لهذه الوسيلة الجديدة. نتيجة لذلك نجد أن بعض البلدان الثرية نسبياً ذات القدرات التكنولوجية المتطورة لديه بضع «بوابات على الانترنت» أو«Internet ports» في حين أن عدد المستخدمين يتزايد بشكل أسرع في بلدان أخرى ذات هيكلية أضعف.
وبناء على الفوارق في البنية التحتية والوضع السياسي، يمكن تقسيم العالم العربي إلى مناطق ذات درجات تطور متباينة وهي: بلدان شمال أفريقيا، المنطقة العربية الوسطى، المشرق ومصر، وبلدان الخليج العربي. وتؤمن العديد من المواقع على الانترنت تعليقات أو اخبار عن موضوع معيَّن لذلك فإن استخدام هذه المواقع قد يكون له أحيانًُا عواقب غير متوقعة في مناطق حساسة سياسياً. وبما أن التحكم بالمواقع الالكترونية أصعب بكثير من الاعلام المرئي والمسموع أو حتى المكتوب يعمد العديد من الانظمة الفاشتية إلى قمع مواقع الانترنت أو معاقبة من يديرونها. وهنا يطرح سؤال البحث: هل يمكن لتقنيات الرقابة أن تنجح على المدى الطويل نظراً إلى واقع أن هذه الرقابة تتطلب مراقبة وثيقة لكل الـ«Internet ports» في البلاد وهذا غير ممكن إلا في حال كان عدد مستخدمي المواقع محدودًا جداً؟

- See more at: https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/future-bloggers-arab-region-step-towards-electronic-democracy#sthash.tloHFVGc.dpuf