CyberOrient

Online Journal of the Virtual Middle East

Vol. 5, Iss. 1, 2011

CyberOrient

Online Journal of the Virtual Middle East

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The Islam-Online Crisis: A Battle of Wasatiyya vs. Salafi Ideologies?

Mona Abdel-Fadil

Abstract:

Islam Online has been one of the most prominent and stable Islamic websites since it was founded in 1997. However, in March 2010 Islam Online suffered a major crisis, which has come to be known as 'the IOL-Crisis'. This is a suitable case for exploring whether multiple layers of authority are at play in online religious communities(Campbell 2007). At the time of the crisis, I was conducting fieldwork with the social team of IOL-Arabic. This article provides rich ethnographic detail about the time before, during, and after the crisis – as experienced by the social team. I outline how the social team made sense of the crisis through producing crisis-narratives that draw on Islam Online's institutional narrative. Moreover, I illustrate how narratives about the crisis gradually shift to alternate explanations, in tact with new developments of the crisis. I conclude with reflections on what types of authority were drawn on during the IOL-Crisis.

Introduction

> Last Monday the Cairo employees were restrained from accessing the IOL- server. They all risk losing their jobs. (...) they worry that a *salafi* perspective will replace their *wasatiyya* outlook and that IOL will basically become a *shar'i* type of website.
>
> (Field diary, March 22, 2010).

Islam Online (IOL) has been one of the most prominent and stable Islamic websites since it was founded in 1997. Many were taken by surprise when IOL suffered a major crisis in March 2010. The IOL-Crisis is a vital event in the history of IOL, but also in the history of Islamic and religious websites,

Corresponding author: Mona Abdel-Fadil, University of Oslo, Postboks 1010 Blindern, 0315 Oslo, Norway. E-mail: mail@monaabdel-fadil.com

and thus warrants scholarly attention. Previous studies of religious websites tend to argue that the Internet is a space for negotiation and contestation of traditional religious authority[1]. Still, as Campbell (2007:2) points out, such claims are rarely sufficiently substantiated, nor do they distinguish between different layers of religious authority 'in terms of hierarchy, structure, ideology and text'. Campbell (2007:2) calls on researchers to 'identify what specific form or type of religious authority is affected. Is it the power of traditional religious leaders? (...) Is it the corporate ideology of the community?' In exploring these questions, Campbell (2007, 2010) combines online research and offline interviews with *users* of religious websites. In a similar vein, Krüger (2005:11-2) argues that in order to analyse 'invisible aspects' of online religious communities, such as communication behind the scenes, fieldwork is required[2]. In my view, this argument is equally valid for studies of *producers* of religious websites, as in the present case.

At the time of the IOL-Crisis, I was conducting fieldwork with the Social Team (ST) of IOL Arabic, the producers of IOL's output on society, family, and social counselling. My data about the IOL-Crisis sheds light on 'invisible aspects' of IOL and offers the opportunity to examine Campbell's questions about religious authority through a specific case. More precisely, the aims of this article are threefold[3]. First, I provide a reconstruction of IOL's institutional identity narrative (corporate ideology) and an analysis of how it was brought into play during the build up of the crisis. Second, I focus on how the ST made sense of the IOL-Crisis, through producing crisis-narratives[4]. Third, I outline how IOL's ties with a traditional religious authority are called upon during the crisis. Before delving into empirical detail, I provide some background on IOL and my fieldwork.

The field, methodology and ethics

The website

IOL was dedicated to 'spreading *da'wa*, (propagation of faith)' and aimed at promoting 'a unified and lively Islam that keeps up with modern times in all areas' (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009:15,11). From the outset IOL was

multifaceted, providing much more than digitalized versions of religious scripture. The site offered a range of services such as news, fatwas and counselling services. Particularly in recent years IOL expanded and came to include numerous new specialized subpages. IOL also launched the satellite counselling channel *Ana*, to which a number of web-employees were outsourced. Employing Campbell's (2005:18) typology of discourses religious groups use about technology, IOL is best described as framing 'technology for affirming religious life' where the internet 'serves to affirm or build communal identity and cohesion (...) Identity comes from reinforcing a particular set of convictions or values that are transported online'.

Ideology

IOL promoted itself as a wasatiyya website. According to Høigilt (2008:14) wasatiyya advocates correct Islamic praxis and adaptation to contemporary society. Yusef Al-Qaradawi, an Egyptian Islamic scholar based in Qatar, is considered to be the founder of the idea of wasatiyya[5] (Gräf 2009). However, some of his views, such as endorsing suicide bombings in Palestine, are considered 'extremist' and for these he has been banned from entering the US and UK (The Economist 2010). Still, Al-Qaradawi represents a moderate voice on certain topics, and is a prominent figure of offline religious authority – with a global impact. IOL enjoyed close ties to Al-Qaradawi, although, according to Gräf (2008:2), his role was symbolic and simply lent IOL credibility. It is likely that Al-Qaradawi's support, fame and location contributed to the way IOL was financed. IOL was funded by private donations to Al-Balagh society in Doha / the Qatari board of administers. Al-Qaradawi has been the head of the Qatari board since 1997. Funding has been from primarily Saudi and Qatari sources (Abdel-Baky 2010:2).

The Setting

IOL's main offices were located in Sixth of October City, outside of Cairo. The office building is striking with modern blue glass windows and a glass

roof visible from afar. The most impressive feature of the building is the large hall, resembling an Islamic courtyard. The IOL offices themselves resemble modern offices in many corners of the world. Most employees shared open-space offices, and there was no gender segregation. The only aspect that may point to this being an office in Egypt is the relatively old IT-equipment. This is perhaps surprising, considering that computers are the main tool of an organization running a website. IOL-Cairo's staff consisted of roughly 350 employees – two thirds of whom worked on editorial content[6]. The ST counted nine members, only two of whom were male. The leader of the ST was female. Most of the members were in their thirties, and held a BA degree.

Methodology

I conducted fieldwork with the ST, from the beginning of December 2009 until the end of June 2010[7]. I attended editorial meetings as a 'complete observer',[8] (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007:82), on a regular basis from December 2009 to mid-March 2010, up until the crisis erupted and the editorial meetings ceased. I also observed each ST-member's regular work-tasks during this period. Editorial meetings had a relatively set structure and were held weekly. I attended all editorial meetings with a mini-laptop and took observation notes throughout the meeting. Following Emerson et al. (1995), my notes consist of logging observations of episodes and dialogues, rather than my own interpretations[9]. Once the crisis hit IOL, my role changed into participant-observer and interviewer. In addition to interviews with the ST-members, I conducted interviews with the counsellors contracted to respond to IOL-users' marital problems (8). Interviews were audio-recorded, and interview-quotes have been transcribed. Moreover, I have thematically coded my data in Nvivo[10]. Dialogues referred to in this article took place in colloquial Egyptian Arabic[11]. Translations into English are my own.

Ethical Considerations

Due to the sensitivity of topics, I anonymise all quotes and observations. I simply use A, B, C etc. in order of utterance, rather than employing

pseudonyms. I start with A for each new episode. This is an ethical decision. Since I happened to be conducting fieldwork during a major crisis, my data provide rare 'thick descriptions' of how the IOL-Crisis was perceived from within IOL's Cairo offices. However, I do not want to draw attention to *who* said what during the conflict. This is particularly true of editorial meetings where my presence was as a 'complete observer', and my informants carried out many conversations as if I was not there. By starting out afresh with A in each episode, it is difficult for even those who know the ST-members to assess who said what.

IOL's Institutional Narrative

In this section I identify, on the basis of my observations, how IOL's institutional identity is founded on the tropes 'family' and 'the message'. Interview-extracts further clarify how 'the message' is understood by the ST.

The first editorial meeting I attend is on December 6, when the ST are reminiscing a successful IOL Eid celebration. Several references to being 'an IOL family' (*ahl*) are made amidst exchanging funny anecdotes of excited children riding bicycles and eating sweets, followed by shared laughter. The meeting moves to more editorial concerns, and there is a knock on the door. It is the head of IOL Arabic. He asks us to join in the celebration of the Ana channel and the return of the employees from Ana to IOL. We leave the meeting and head to the large hall:

> Employees are welcomed back and chocolates are passed around. (...) The speeches are barely audible. (...) The general gist seems to be to welcome back to those who worked for Ana. I hear 'welcome back to the IOL house, the IOL house is big'. This is followed by laughter that spreads amongst those assembled to listen.
>
> (Field notes, December 6, 2009).

This episode is the first of many fieldwork-episodes that involve descriptions of ST or IOL at large as an 'IOL family'. 'The IOL house' appears to be

a variation of the same metaphor. In my view, the family metaphor is at the core of IOL's institutional narrative. According to Linde (2003:1) institutional narratives constitute social tacit knowledge and serve to:

> reproduce the institution, reproduce or challenge the power structures of the institution, induct new members, create the identity of the institution and its members (...) We may understand this as the way an institution uses narrative to create and reproduce its identity by the creation and maintenance of an institutional memory.

In other words, an institutional narrative is a means of reproducing an organization's identity. According to Linde (2001:3) becoming a member of an institution 'involves learning the stories about that institution which everyone must know, the appropriate times and reasons to tell them'. Moreover, Linde (2003:4) contends that 'narratives that are repeatable through time and across tellers' particularly shape 'the way that institutions remember their past and use that remembering to create current identities for both the institution and its members'. These insights appear to be valid for the IOL ST context. During my fieldwork I was struck by how often narratives of organizational identity featured in various dialogues. In my analysis, 'the message' (*al risala*) is also an important component of IOL's institutional identity narrative. Following up on frequent references to 'the message' during fieldwork, I explicitly asked 'what is the message?' in interviews. A's answer is representative:

> Islam is a holistic religion. Islam is not just about worship, prayer and fasting. It is (also) about all parts of life and interacting with people. When we counsel on how to nurture children, or how to choose a life partner, this is part of Islam. You cannot departmentalize Islam. In our view Islam is life, with all that it encompasses from you wake up until you go to sleep. (...) This is the message.
>
> (Interview, March 21, 2010).

In response to 'what is the message?' the ST-members highlight 'lived Islam',' Islam is life', and 'it is a lived message'. In their elaborations they explicitly forge a link between Islam and living in modern society. Moreover, there is often an emphasis on 'the message' being 'balanced' and *wasat* (middle-ground), drawing on both Islamic and non-Islamic perspectives. As for what 'the message' is held to achieve, there are slight variations in the responses. For example, according to B the aim is to assist people in 'how to live a happy, good life in acceptance'. In C's words, 'we attempt to equip individuals with the tools to manage their lives and develop'. And D simply says 'the end is producing positive behavioural patterns'. In sum, the emphasis is on developing awareness and empowerment that can alter behaviour in a constructive manner. Part and parcel of creating awareness is discussing topics that some Muslims may deem controversial. In E's opinion: 'We discuss all sorts of topics. Nothing is off limits. We also discuss topics we may disagree with. But we believe in discussing why a phenomenon came about rather than sticking our head in the dirt'[12].

IOL's identity narrative can thus be reconstructed as follows:

> *We are an 'IOL family', united in one cause, namely to deliver a message. 'The message' is founded on wasatiyya Islam, is balanced and aims at creating awareness and empowering Arab populations. It is focused on 'lived Islam' and relates to modern society and thus may include discussion of controversial topics. 'The message' has the potential to improve the lives of many IOL-users across the globe*[13].

The family metaphor appears to signify close interpersonal ties between employees that resemble kinship[14]. It also seems to function as an image of being united in a common cause. The significance of being an 'IOL family' seems to be in constructing a salient group identity. It also underlines the sentiment that working for IOL is far more than a job: it is also an idealistic call to spread 'the message'. During my fieldwork I came to understand, that belief in 'the message' can at times be equated

to dedication and willingness to sacrifice[15]. This can take the form of working long hours or being paid less than if employed by other media outlets. Moreover, the institutional narrative feeds into the discourse of the internet being framed as affirming religious lifestyle (Campbell, 2005:13-4).

IOL's institutional identity narrative is important for understanding how the IOL-Crisis was eventually made sense of by the ST. In the next section I outline fieldwork episodes building up to the crisis.

Before the Crisis: Tensions Rise

The ST editorial meetings in December and January pass without major events and display no signs of a major crisis being just around the corner. The editorial meeting of February 7 is the first time I take note of 'organizational discontent' featuring as a prominent theme. The extracts in this section are from my field notes (7 February, 2010). At the beginning of the meeting, there is mention of changes to the server:

> A: The server has changed. Why? Is it something technical?
> B: Let's not ask the question why*...
> A: But, we want to understand...
> Some of the other ST members confirm the server change, and make similar comments. There seems to be frustration around the table, but there is the usual atmosphere of smiling, laughter, and comic relief.
>
> [* My interpretation is that there is an undertone: do not ask why because I do not know the answer].

They then turn to editorial matters. Towards the middle of the meeting, I realize that the previous dialogue is an indication of something being wrong, but I do not understand what. There is mention of Mariam Hagri, one of the founders of IOL, having resigned. In this context, explicit references to organizational discontent are made:

> A: Did you hear that Sheikh Yusef (Al-Qaradawi) called? (...)
> B: He is promising that changes in the organization will.... not harm employees.
> C: It (the organizational change) will be good *inshaallah* (*kheir inshaallah*)
> D: Yes, *Kheir inshaallah*, all the indicators point in this direction (laughter) the server etc. (laughs again). For sure it's all good. For sure it will be for the better.
>
> *[The latter statement appears to be ironic and all laugh in response].

The mention of Al-Qaradawi, and in such a familiar manner as 'Sheikh Yusef', is interesting, as his role has been downplayed as a strategic alliance (Gräf 2008:2). Yet, my empirical data suggest that Al-Qaradawi's role was one of significance to the ST-members. In retrospect, this dialogue also seems to be a reference to a letter of concern about organizational changes in IOL, sent to Al-Qaradawi and signed by 250 IOL-employees. During the course of the meeting I learn that the discontent I observed is related to a new board of administers of IOL, in Qatar:

> A: It seems I take things differently. I feel like there is no hope of change. There is no possibility of reaction. Because, we do not know what is happening. There is no transparency.
> B: Certainly not at our level. There is barely anyone in the (Cairo) management who knows anything.
> A: Yes, This is what is driving me crazy, that even on the management level...
> C: There will not be a revolution ...
> A: No, I am not suggesting a revolution. But, the hope is killed from within because the context (of change) is not understood.
> C: Sometimes we cannot understand the decision because the context is much greater. Sometimes understanding a part will not help us understand the context.

B: Yes, but sometimes understanding a part, like the server, or understanding many parts, will help us understand the context, help us see the greater picture. (...)

A: Are we expected to be puppets? (...) IOL used to be different from other organizations. Yet, the longer I stay, the more I feel it is the same as everywhere else.

C: These differences have come with the new board of administers (in Qatar). It wasn't like this with the old board.

D: It is the first time they have switched the whole board of administers in one go. The new board is all new, except for two, one of whom has resigned (...)

E: Yes, there is no knowledge. And you are told something, and then a second thing is written, and a third thing is done!A: And what should we do? Just sit and wait while decisions are being made over our heads? Just sit and take it? Wait and accept?

C: Wait and accept – no. We have to wait, so we can gain understanding and then make a decision.

A: I mean this is against the interest of the work. It is against the interest of the job. It is against the interest of the country. (...)

F: (to me) this was not really a good example of a meeting. It was more of a heart to heart (*fadfadah*).

There is also talk of a mysterious committee (*lagna*) of which no one knows the purpose. The ST also talk about having repeatedly asked the new board of its intentions, without receiving a clear answer. This meeting is the first time overt organizational discontent with the new board in Qatar is expressed. It is also the first time I hear of Ana closing. When I probe G after the meeting, she explains that 'Ana closed down one and a half month ago due to lack of funding'. This means that shortly after the celebration of Ana channel, it actually closed down.

When I arrive at IOL on February 14, I discover that the regular editorial meeting had been held earlier than usual without my being informed. It is possible that this was deliberate. Yet, it seems equally likely that it was an

oversight. Extracts in this section are from my field notes (February 14, 2010). I catch up with A who informs me that the meeting dealt with the ST's 'concern' with the new Qatari board. The conversation continues:

> M[16]: Are you worried about the possibility of editorial dictates?
> A: We must assess whether there will be an editorial interference. Many people will have problems with that. But at present it has not happened. (…)
> M: (I repeat) So, you are not worried?
> A: Well, it depends. Personal worry versus worry for the idea. I can choose to leave. I will have a choice. I am not worried about the idea. It is a good idea, and I can take it with me and do it somewhere else.
> M: Like for example start a new website?
> A: Yes, exactly. As for doing it within the organization, one should not get too attached to the organization. The organization should not be your mother and father (laughingly). It is just a workplace.

It is interesting that A talks of how the organization should not be 'your mother and father'. I believe A says this in an attempt to convince herself. She is one of the ST who frequently referred to IOL as 'family' previously. Perhaps this is an expression of the sentiment that if IOL changes, she will no longer consider it her 'family'. The conversation turns to funding and editorial control:

> A: Now there is a worry that the Qatari board may start to interfere with (editorial) details and that the *wasat* ground may … dissolve.
> M: And what happens if they start to dictate details?
> A: People will leave. We cannot do our job. Our work is based on a message. You cannot dictate how we write or do journalism. We are not like other journalistic media in Egypt, who one day are pro a certain leader, and the next day against.

> Our work is based on values, principles and it is based on conveying a message. This determines our work. We have been developing this idea for 10 years. You cannot just lose the message. (...) We must continue showing everyone that our message is important.

When I arrive at the IOL-offices on February 28, no one knows whether there will be an editorial meeting. After some confusion, a meeting is assembled. The previously mentioned mysterious committee is now identified as a 'complaints committee' from Qatar. B says 'If Qatar is not interested in IOL, we can find funding elsewhere' after which good news, albeit semi-official, is shared: Saudi partners[17] have agreed to fund a new website project. C says 'this does not mean that we are careless about our work. On the contrary, we have to work well' (Field notes, February 28, 2010). This sequence shows that IOL was taking measures to secure a new website for spreading their 'message', in case disagreements with the Qatari board escalate. The rest of the meeting consists of an active and engaged discussion of editorial topics, which illustrates the ST's determination to work as 'normal'[18]. The next editorial meeting I attend is on 14 March, when the clash between IOL Cairo and the Qatari board is irrefutable.

The IOL Crisis Begins

The dialogues in this section are extracts from my field notes (14 March, 2010), and suggest that much has happened in the past two weeks. For instance, the 'committee of complaints' is interpreted as having been a pretext to interview the 250 employees who signed the letter to Al-Qaradawi, and review their work-contracts[19]. Also, rumours of the Qatari board wanting to close down IOL-Cairo are flourishing, which brings about insecurities. Distress is projected via comic relief, as in B's humorous comment 'My husband is looking to buy a beans-vender-cart (*arbiyet ful*), and Mr. C is looking to rent at taxi'. It becomes evident that the Qatari board have employed a lawyer to handle the conflict, and IOL-Cairo has followed suit. The ST talk of resignation, solidarity and workers' rights. They will allegedly receive a settlement if they resign. However,

they do not trust the Qatari board's lawyer. The ST consider collective action to be the most appropriate, and advocate for collectively staying on. But refusing to resign comes with its own ambiguities: if a new website is launched, when? - and will the ST be a part of it? Towards the end of the meeting I ask if they can tell me what is going on:

> D: It seems that the new administration want IOL to transfer into Islam Web, you know, only rules and Koran. They are asking: why should IOL produce news and the social section? What has that got do with Islam? You know?
> M: And, has anyone been let go?
> D: No, not yet, but there are rumours of huge cuts of journalists and editors. There are two people who resigned in protest (...)
> M: And, have you been given new editorial guidelines?
> D: No, not yet, but there are indications ... we expect that this will come. (...) I guess you could say that the IOL-Crisis, is that we do not feel Qatar's funding gives them the right to own the message of IOL.

In this segment D states that she feels the Qatari board's funding does not give them the right to own 'the message'. Moreover, she expresses a fear that IOL will be transformed into a more narrowly defined website focusing on rules and scripture. This description is in accordance with how E describes salafis. E jokingly tells me: 'In our view a salafi-approach is 'The Prophet said, the Koran said *we-alsalamu'alikum*'' (Interview, March 21, 2010). 'Alsalamu'alikum' in this context connotes 'goodbye' or 'over and out'. The sentiments expressed in dialogue with A and E are important parts of what I consider *the* IOL-Crisis narrative at this point in time.

The Ideological Narrative of the Crisis Emerges

In mid-March ST-members are strikingly uniform in their understanding of the IOL-Crisis. The crisis is framed as an ideological dispute and the narrative can be reconstructed as follows:

> *The Qatari administration wants IOL to follow a more conservative, salafi line. We do not believe Qatari funding means that they own the idea. We are the owners because we own the idea, the message. We were used to autonomy with regards to what we produce. We are not used to content being controlled by funding. This is new to IOL, it may not be new to Egypt, but it is new to IOL.*

In this narrative, there is a strong sense of 'ownership of the idea' being more valid than funding. Also, the uniqueness of 'the family' in an Egyptian context is highlighted. In addition it speaks to fears of Gulf salafism gaining ground in Egypt (Field and Hamam, 2009). The ideological narrative draws on IOL's institutional memory and identity, and underlines the importance of 'the message'. In my analysis, framing the crisis as a battle between wasatiyya and salafism may actually serve to both strengthen and reproduce the institutional narrative about IOL-Cairo. It affirms the importance of spreading the wasatiyya message and thereby strengthens the 'family' bond. This is part one of the ideological narrative. As will be illustrated, the crisis-narrative is adapted when further developments take place. By mid-March, there are also indications that IOL's institutional identity was served a severe blow.

Fragility of 'the message' and the fall of 'the family'

The following dialogues are extracts from the editorial meeting on 14 March (Field notes, March 14, 2010):

> A: Part of the crisis (for us) is that we, or let me talk for myself, was married to IOL. It was an opportunity to idealize the organization, to iconize someone. And then when something happens to the organization you find yourself falling apart. Maybe, it is a good thing to get some distance, get a new perspective on oneself, one's life and career.

This quote stems from the same person who previously talked to me about the importance of seeing IOL as 'just an organization' rather than 'mother and

father'. In light of the crisis, it seems likely that A is attempting to convince herself to let go of 'the family'. There are others signs of disillusionment amongst the ST, during this meeting. Some members are relating how they are loosing faith in both 'the message' and in IOL itself. B Refers to a meeting outside of IOL, where she met someone who was enthusiastic about IOL. She explains:

> B: I was talking passionately and I almost forgot about the crisis that we are in. And then I remembered... Ah, I am losing faith in everything, in the dream of the message[20].
> C: We are all united in believing in the dream, the message. You must not lose faith in the idea. Try to separate the idea from the organization. Is Islam something wonderful or not? That some people* are trying to turn it into a narrow version of Islam, is another story...
>
> * [Seems to be a reference to the Qatari administration]

As a follow-up D says: 'All I want is for IOL the organization to go back to the way it was. I keep on closing my eyes and hoping for the better. I keep on hoping it was all a bad dream'. F talks of losing a loved one and thinking that you cannot go on, but realizing that you can. He uses examples from his own life. B has stepped out to answer a phone. G says: 'I am concerned about B losing faith in the message, we all have to help her regain faith in the message'. This concern is followed up by the following response from H:

> I am thinking of a rose, you know. It is beautiful and has a lovely smell, but it has a short life. Let us overlook what type of death it endured, stamped on etc. But, the rose also has seeds, spreads seeds that can be replanted, and can grow new flowers. I want to take my seed, but I am in a freezer... I am thinking that IOL may be just that, our rose, and now we have seeds that we can spread and develop elsewhere. And, now I am thinking is it not better to spread the seeds, rather than

stay in IOL?

E: I love you! (exclaims spontaneously and laughingly).

Everyone joins in the laughter.

Essentially H appears to be saying that perhaps the IOL-crisis is a blessing in disguise. In my reading, this is distinctively a counselling perspective, acknowledging frustration, yet instigating hope (and thus empowerment), in order to continue. During the meeting claims are made to IOL-audience having dropped by 50% since the Qatari take over. This meeting takes place the day before the crisis erupts into a full-blown conflict. I believe the outbreak of an acute conflict was akin to dropping a bombshell on the ST.

The Crisis Erupts and the Ideological Narrative Evolves

Only a day later, on Monday March 15, things have changed dramatically. The IOL-Crisis has erupted into a severe conflict. The Qatari board of administers have stated that they will close down the IOL offices in Cairo with some 350 employees[21]. The first step in this direction is that IOL-employees in Cairo are prohibited from accessing the IOL-server. During my visit on March 21, A tells me about this development. In her own words:

> The Qataris want to close down IOL Cairo, and only publish out of Qatar. On Monday (March 15) they took down the server and took our passwords and usernames, so we are not able to publish anything on IOL's webpage.

> (Field notes, March 21, 2010).

I tell A that I read about Al-Qaradawi stating he would fire the Qatari board members responsible for the crisis, and ask for her comment. A affirms this, adding that Al-Qaradawi will need the support of the rest of the board. 'It could also be that the majority (of the board) votes against this. It is still unclear', A says. Being denied access to the server and told that the Cairo offices will be shut down are important escalations of the crisis.

These incidents also function as narrative turning points that contribute to the evolving of the IOL-Crisis narrative.

The Ideological Narrative - Part Two

Part two of the ideological narrative adds on to what has already been established in part one. It is an adaptation in order to incorporate recent events, and can be reconstructed as such:

> *The Qataris accused us of publishing things that were 'un-Islamic' and too open-minded. They disapproved of us (ST) writing about Valentine's Day, and sexual relations. They objected to our (ST's) counselling services in general. They disliked IOL publishing photographs of unveiled women and our (IOL's) news-story called 'Palestine's Holocaust'. This was amongst the first items to be removed from the IOL website, after the Qatari administration denied us access to the server. The subpages Al Islamyoon and 20's were removed too. Now we are blocked from the IOL-server, and are not able to do our job. We want to continue working with the message. We want to continue doing what we love and what we believe in. We are not mainly fighting for our rights. The most important thing to us is the message. If they wanted to make a purely salafi website, why couldn't they just start another website? Why did they have to hijack IOL? We are hoping Al-Qaradawi will bring IOL back to us.*

In part two, the crisis is still framed as a battle of ideologies. This claim is substantiated by depicting ST as having been targeted for their discussion of 'un-Islamic' topics. The removal of 20's and Islamayoon[22] is mentioned as further evidence of a salafist turn. Institutional memory about the importance of 'the message' is induced. Indeed, 'the family' and 'the cause' are deemed more important than workers' rights, suggesting a willingness to sacrifice for 'the message'. There is also mention of 'Palestine's Holocaust', a continuously updated news-story that illustrated the number of Palestinians killed by Israelis. The removal of the latter

indicates regional-political discrepancies, rather than a clash of Islamic ideologies. When I asked the ST why the Qatari board disapproved of this particular story, I was told that the Qatari state[23] is reluctant to upset the US and their close ties to Israel. The narrative also reveals that much hope is riding on Al-Qaradawi, still formally the head of the Qatari board, and unavailable for commentary due to a health trip to Saudi Arabia. The hope is that Al-Qaradawi through his standing and influence will be able to turn the events around. Employing a narrative perspective, one could say that this is a story about *a hero* (IOL Cairo) and *the unfit* (Qatari board) who transgresses social order. The story includes a third character who is perceived to be *the saviour* (Al-Qaradawi) and who can potentially reinstate social order[24]. The question: 'if the Qatari administration wanted to make a purely salafi website, why did they hijack IOL?' is intriguing, and will be revisited.

IOL-Cairo employees are active media-players, spreading their narrative about the crisis, through Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and the blog 'Voice of IOL'. The IOL-Crisis is swiftly picked up by Arab and international media. News-stories draw on the ideological narrative of the IOL-Crisis[25]. In this sense, B seems to be right on target when stating 'we are media people, and we are trying to use our expertise to our advantage' (Field notes, March 21, 2010).

Al-Qaradawi's Significance

Since March 15, IOL-Cairo employees have been arranging daily sit-ins and protests, mostly on site. These protests are then transmitted via social media. On March 21:

> A and B lead the way to whiteboards placed by the entrance. The whiteboards display letters of support and newspaper-articles from different organizations and media. Print-outs of subpages of IOL are also on display (such as Islamyoon). (...) A few ST-members assemble around one computer to watch the Qatari board's lawyer talk to the media about the IOL-Crisis. The energy is tense. (...) After several minutes of watching

in silence, B exclaims: 'why doesn't Al-Qaradawi call us and support us? Is there is any direct contact with him, not just his office? Does he know about the latest developments?' C nods in response.

(Field notes March 21, 2010).

It is interesting that in a crisis like this ST-members need and expect the support of Al-Qaradawi. It points to him representing more than a strategic alliance. On March 22, Al-Qaradawi announced, on *Al Jazeera*, that he would reverse resolutions by the new board and suspend those responsible. He added: 'IOL must return to its' family' (Al-Qaradawi, 2010)[26]. Intriguingly, Al-Qaradawi also draws on IOL's institutional memory, employing the family metaphor to signify the IOL-Cairo staff. Moreover, his statement feeds in to the crisis-narrative that 'the family' are the owners of 'the message'. Al-Qaradawi's statement can be interpreted as an attempt to save the 'IOL family'.

Dooms-day and Shifting Narratives

When I arrive at IOL on March 24, IOL-employees are in a plenary meeting. After the meeting, A greetings me with:

A. Did you here the latest news?
M: I read something online this morning about sheikh Al-Qaradawi, but it was unconfirmed.
A: What did you read?
M: That Al-Qaradawi was sacked from the board of administers.
A: It is true.
M: It is true? I cannot believe it.
A: Yes, it was not expected and is quite a blow as we had a lot of hope riding on him. And who is to protect us now? We feel a little unprotected. (...)
A receives a call, I step aside and talk to B while A is on the phone. B expresses a similar sentiment.

> B: All hope has been hanging on Al -Qaradawi, and now this gone. We found out last night. The Qatari government got involved, sacked Qaradawi and reinstated the two that were the origins of the problems (...).
> I resume my conversation with A.
> A: It is quite a shock. We are starting to wonder if they were after Qaradawi himself. It seems that the Qatari state was under pressure from America to remove Al-Qaradawi. It may be related to IOL's active reporting on Palestine. It could be related to accusations about Al-Qaradawi being a supporter of terrorism, you know.
>
> (Field notes, March 24, 2010).

In an unexpected twist of events, Al-Qaradawi was eradicated. There is no doubt that this was a severe blow to my informants. It basically spelled out 'doomsday'. It meant that they had lost the battle of IOL and the Cairo offices would be shut down. IOL would not be able to 'return to its family'. A's answers represent a shift of perspective from the previous crisis-narrative. Now, the emphasis is on US and Qatari macro politics, rather than ideological differences within Islam. From a narrative perspective, Al-Qaradawi's eradication transformed the IOL-Crisis narrative into a *tragedy*. Al-Qaradawi is (re)casted as *the tragic*, who is unable to assist *the hero* in restoring social order. Al-Qaradawi's removal is thus an important narrative turning point. The outcome of the crisis and thus the end of the crisis-narrative is now known. Knowing the end of the narrative facilitates new and multiple versions of the crisis-narrative[27].

Narratives Multiply

On March 24, Ibrahim Al-Ansari, an Islamic scholar of the new generation[28] and recently appointed head of the Qatari board, tells *Al Jazeera* that the crisis is not related to ideology. He says that the dispute concerns 'different visions about IOL' and adds: 'We want to develop IOL, they want status quo' (Al-Ansari 2010). In the nine weeks following March 24, the ST no longer uniformly frame the crisis as an ideological battle,

and Arab media follow suit[29]. New narrative versions, which highlight political motivations or inefficient management as the reasons for the crisis, surface. These are classified as 'narrative versions', because they are in dialogue with the first IOL-Crisis narrative that focused on ideology.

Political Narratives

A number of ST-members abandon the framing of the crisis as a battle between salafi and wasatiyya. Instead, they provide narrative versions that emphasise external, political factors:

> *'The Holocaust of Palestine' is one of the main reasons of the crisis. The evidence for this is that it was the first item to be removed from the IOL-website. The Qatari state gave into pressures from US Congress and/or Israel[30]. IOL-coverage of Palestine put Israel in a bad light. It was a plot to get rid of Al-Qaradawi while he was prohibited from responding due to illness. Qatar hosts a US military base and has trade agreements with Israel and cannot afford to upset its allies.*

The narrative depicts IOL having become too political and critical in their covering of the Israel-Palestine Conflict. Moreover, Al-Qaradawi himself was a target, due to 'being on a terrorism list' and his eradication was necessary. In this reading IOL is seen as a dangerous tool. Commenting on this B says 'we are essentially a social movement, we create awareness and equip people with tools in their lives'. He likens the Qatari take-over of IOL to 'cutting off the wings of the organization, so it can no longer fly'. Less common political versions relate struggles of regional influence between Qatar and Egypt, or Qatar and Saudi Arabia[31]. The former relates to IOL being an influential enterprise, and the latter to Saudi Arabian donors being dissatisfied with the Qatari take-over. Still, the explanation ST-members find the most plausible is that Qatar was pressured by the US and/or Israel. Next I turn to narratives that focus on internal factors.

Inefficient Management Narratives

> *It is not a question of salafi vs. wasati. It is a question of poor management of IOL (Cairo). IOL expanded too much, with numerous subpages like Al Islamyoon and the launching of Ana channel. It was a dispute about how IOL should be run. But there was a lack of clarity of intention from Qatar's side. And, there was stubbornness on both sides so the conflict got personal. This is why the crisis escalated to this magnitude.*

This narrative focuses on intra-organizational faults. The first time I came across this narrative is in Nadia Elawady's blog of March 24 (Elawady, 2010)[32]. She is a former employee of IOL and sees the crisis as a dispute about what type of organization IOL should be. Elawady maintains that the Qatari board wants to run IOL as an organization for *da'wa* and believe that IOL 'diverted from what it intended to be'. The board is dissatisfied with the expansions of IOL, initiated by the Cairo-management, because they left IOL's core pages suffering. Expansion also implied financial investments that could have been spent on increasing salaries or updating IT. In her description of IOL-Cairo's reactions, Elawady affirms my analysis of IOL's institutional identity. Elawady (2010) describes how employees consider one another 'family' and emphasizes the significance of 'the message':

> It's also important to mention that to many IslamOnliners, IslamOnline is not a job; it's a message. This has also added to the loyalty many employees show to the organization and the upper management. They aren't all in it necessarily for the stable salary or the comfortable working environment. They are in it because they strongly believe in the role IslamOnline is playing in portraying a moderate Islam.

> This helps explain the position of many workers currently on strike. They are not only defending their jobs; they are defending the message.

In sum, Elawady believes the IOL-Crisis is a power-struggle between Doha and Cairo about how IOL should be run, one that 'got ugly and personalized'. Similar narratives were put forward by some of the IOL-counsellors in interviews[33]. For instance, Dr. A talks of IOL becoming so large and unfocused that it became 'a dinosaur, with body parts moving on its own'. He believes that IOL's constant expansion was the cause of its demise. 'It is our fault for not focusing on our expertise', he says[34]. In a similar vein, Dr. B questions the (Cairo) management's decision to expand when IOL's income was based on donations. In her opinion, the viability of new projects was unsure, as the funding could suddenly be discontinued. Dr. B. provides the analogy of a father in Qatar, and a mother in Egypt to describe the conflict. She is more critical of Qatar's role than Dr. A. In Dr. B's own words:

> The mother knows all the details of the every day lives of the children, while the distant father may have opinions without first hand knowledge. One day the father can decide he wants a divorce, he may leave her in kindness[35], or he may be brutal and, with no dialogue, simply state he will take the children and their house, and she is out on the streets. The Qatari administration chose the latter strategy.

A slightly different angle is provided by Dr. C who says 'it is a lack of professionalism from the Cairo side to think they owned IOL, because they had the thoughts. Qatar had the money. They have to respect that'. She uses the analogy of a developer building a large fancy house for many millions, and then deciding to tear it down. 'Is it a shame to tear the house down? Yes, but the owner can do that', she adds. These narratives are 'outsider narratives' in that they are proposed by individuals outside the core of IOL[36].

Fusing Narrative Versions

In the early days of the crisis the ideological narrative was the *only* crisis-narrative to be heard amongst ST and in news-coverage. The lack of

alternative interpretations represents a 'narrative silence'. Yet as events developed, and in the weeks following the crisis, political narratives surfaced as the dominant narrative version amongst the ST and in Arab media[37]. The latter indicates IOL Cairo's media-proficiency. Counsellors also talked of inefficient management. At times, political and inefficient management narratives were fused into one. What happened to the ideological narrative? Did it simply disappear? The answer is yes and no. With time, it becomes evident that a number of ST- members no longer could consider the ideological narrative plausible. This may be a response to Al-Ansari's adamant denial of ideological motivation. Yet, not all have abandoned an ideological framing of the crisis. For instance, A elegantly fuses the political and ideological narrative versions into one. A maintains that the Qatari administration disapproved of 'the message' and ST's discussion of unsuitable topics, but also believes US-Congress and Zionist pressures led to the 'Qatari-hijack of IOL' (Interview, May 2, 2010). A says that the goal is to transform IOL into a website that 'is not too social and not too political'. Also, some of the counsellors see the crisis as result of both ideological differences and inefficient management. It is interesting to note that none of the ST talked of inefficient management. Those who provided versions of this narrative were ex-employee Elawady and counsellors, neither of whom breathed the conflict day and night in the IOL-offices.

Before concluding, I take a brief look at actual changes made to the IOL website during and after the crisis.

IOL's Webpage

On March 24, there is no explicit information about the crisis on IOL's homepage or the social pages. Popular subpages of IOL, such as Al Islamiyoon, were removed, which is an indirect sign of the crisis visible to IOL-users. Yet, is there any evidence of a salafist turn on IOL after the Qatari take-over? The social pages are surprisingly unaltered, with the exception of the eradication of interactive counselling. Interestingly, the list of essays dealing with marital problems from a counselling

perspective (including sexual relations) seems to be intact. This means that unsuitable topicality was not the only reason for removing items. No new posts are added. By May, IOL has retrieved older layout and dated posts. Still, the content of the posts do not point in one clear direction. During the crisis and well in to August, IOL appeared to be a website in transition. By mid-August a total refashioning of layout and content has taken place. The social pages now present new content, with headings similar to those displayed prior to the crisis. Most notably IOL now provides 'social counselling' again. Still, by mid-October there are only three 'social counselling' posts, two of which deal with marital relations. All posts produced by the old IOL-ST (my informants) have been removed from the website[38]. These observations suggest that remodelling the IOL website in a salafi direction either was not the goal, or was incomplete.

Conclusion

The IOL-Crisis indicates that even well-established religious websites can abruptly be dismantled or refashioned to fit different needs or ideologies. By focusing on IOL's institutional narrative and various crisis-narratives, I have brought 'invisible' knowledge (Krüger 2005) about IOL to the forefront. Moreover, the IOL-Crisis case supports Campbell's argument about authority being multi-layered. The struggle between IOL Cairo and the Qatari board is hierarchical, in that the latter have more formal and financial power. Still, my data indicate that there may not be a single conflict of authority at the core of the IOL-Crisis. Rather, a set of intersecting and perhaps contradictory range of tensions (ideological, political, inefficient management) seem to be in play. Yet, intriguingly, all crisis-narratives seem to reproduce IOL Cairo's 'corporate ideology', regardless of how they frame the crisis. And, finally, IOL Cairo's close ties to the offline religious authority Al-Qaradawi did not ensure them immunity to the 'hijack of IOL'. Indeed, Al-Qaradawi's elimination from the Qatari board and his replacement by Al-Ansari, indicates that we may be witnessing a generational shift of religious authority.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

[1] See for example, Anderson 2003, Bunt 2003, Hofheinz 2005, Mandaville 2002.

[2] Combining online research with ethnography, interviews, or online surveys, is recommended by other scholars of online religion. See for instance Larsson (2005:2) and Lövheim (2004:61).

[3] Providing a comprehensive review of news-articles that analyse the IOL-Crisis is

beyond the scope of this article. Here, I will only draw on news-articles where this is relevant to fieldwork-episodes.

[4] The communication between Doha and Cairo, during the crisis, was at the top-management level. I cannot draw an accurate picture of communication at this level. Nevertheless, this article sheds some light on what type of information was trickled down from the management level to the ST.

[5] Al-Qaradawi is also a former member of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

[6] The number of regular employees is reported to be between 250-350. Numbers vary in news-reports collected on http://www.diigo.com/list/ahmedikhwan/islamonline-strike-news-, and, http://yalally.blogspot.com/2010/03/blog-post_1740.html

According to one of my informants, IOL Cairo had 350 employees, 150 of whom work with editorial content. Campbell (2001:31) estimates that the entire network of international scholars and writers that IOL draws on is over 1500 individuals.

[7] Prior agreement to conduct fieldwork amongst the Arabic ST was arranged during my visit to Cairo and IOL in May 2009.

[8] 'Complete observer' entails being a silent observer rather than a participant-observer. This applied to my role in the editorial meetings, where I sat quietly, observed and typed field notes. Only as the crisis built up, did I start to ask questions during these meetings.

[9] Still, certain segments elicited immediate interpretations. These are clearly marked as 'interpretations' in my ethnographic notes and are marked with * in the extracts. I spent many hours systematizing the notes for further use, in direct sequence to the observation.

[10] Software for qualitative data analysis.

[11] With the influx of Modern Standard Arabic.

[12] The citations in this section (in order of reference) are from interviews conducted with ST-members on May 23, 2010, May 30, 2010, May 2, 2010, April 11, 2010.

[13] All reconstructed narratives in this article are constructed on the basis of the totality of field notes and interviews. Reconstructed narratives are marked with italics in order to distinguish them from other data, such as interviews and field notes.

[14] It is also possible to interpret the family metaphor as signifying IOL-staff considering one another as 'brothers and sisters' in the same manner as for example members of the Muslim Brotherhood do. However, I do not believe this to be the case, as I never heard ST-members refer to each other as 'brothers' or 'sisters' during fieldwork. The times I have heard kinship relations explicitly mentioned, informants spoke of 'being married to IOL' or considering IOL 'their mother and father'. Moreover, family is a common metaphor in many organizational narratives (Hart, 2003:2).

[15] Lia (1998:69) writes of a similar 'willingness to sacrifice' component when dealing with the formative years of the Muslim Botherhood in Egypt.

[16] M is for my voice.

[17] The question of funding is never specified beyond 'Saudi funders' or 'Saudi partners'. However, it is clear that reference to 'Saudi partners' entails the same sources that previously contributed to funding IOL through donations to the Qatari board.

[18] I was also able to observe work tasks with ST-members up until about a week before the crisis erupted.

[19] See for instance Hassan (2010:1) who mentions that an investigative committee from Qatar questioned the 250 employees who signed the statement to Al-Qaradawi.

[20] For lack of a better translation, this is a direct translation of what was said in Arabic, namely: *Hilm al risala*.

[21] See footnote 6.

[22] 20's was a subpage targeting youth in their twenties, and Islamayoon was a subpage about Islamist movements and ideology.

[23] Often this is not specified further, but sometimes there is mention of the Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs intervening in accordance with news-coverage. See for example Hassan (2010) and Abdel Halim (2010).

[24] This reading is inspired by Hydén (1998).

[25] This argument is based on reading through most of the newspaper articles dealing with the crisis collected on two websites:

http://www.diigo.com/list/ahmedikhwan/islamonline-strike-news-, and, http://yalally. blogspot.com/2010/03/blog-post_1740.html

The articles are in both Arabic and English, and the list contains both Arab (Egyptian and Gulf) and international articles. The two sites contain some cross-references. In addition, I ran online searches of 'IOL-Crisis' in both Arabic and English to supplement the list, yielding a couple of additional articles (not on these two website's lists). If content of a specific article is referred to in the text, I reference it directly.

[26] This is a clip of the IOL-Cairo staff watching Al-Qardawi's statement, followed by their applause and was posted on YouTube and IOL's Facebook page.

[27] This analysis is inspired by Hydén (1998).

[28] He is some 40 years younger than Al-Qaradawi.

[29] This argument is based on reviewing newspaper articles dated after March 24 and that deal with the crisis. The articles are collected on two websites:

http://www.diigo.com/list/ahmedikhwan/islamonline-strike-news-, and, http://yalally. blogspot.com/2010/03/blog-post_1740.html

[30] Sometimes there is mention of CIA, the US Jewish Lobby, Zionists but this is less common than saying US or Israel.

[31] On a few occasions I also heard mention of political motivation related to IOL's alleged

ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, but this was rare. This angle is beyond the scope of this article.

[32] This blog differs from newspaper articles about the IOL-Crisis (see footnote 25) both with regards to content (internal inefficient management), and in that the author is a former IOL-employee.

[33] The prefix 'Dr.' is added to the counsellors for two reasons. 1. To distinguish between them and the ST-members. 2. All of the quoted counsellors were addressed as 'Dr. so and so' by the ST.

[34] In his view IOL's 'expertise' is the social section, and the counselling services in particular.

[35] This is likely to be a reference to a verse 2:229 of the Qu'ran about divorcing 'in kindness'.

[36] The quotes in this section are selected from interviews with counselors conducted on the following dates in 2010 (in order of appearance): May 15, May 9 and May 12.

[37] This argument refers to the articles written after March 24, 2010. See footnote 25 for sources.

[38] By August 2010, OnIslam.net, the offshoot website that the previous IOL-Cairo staff created with the assistance of Saudi funding, is up and running. The previous IOL-Cairo staff have succeeded in the continuation of spreading their 'message' via a new website. The layout and categorization of topics is similar to IOL prior to the crisis. Also, a number of the pre-crisis IOL posts, such as essays and interactive counselling, are now to be found on On Islam.

Overcoming the Digital Divide: The Internet and Political Mobilization in Egypt and Tunisia

Johanne Kuebler

Abstract:

The potential of the Internet as a political tool intrigues scientists and politicians alike. Particularly in the Middle East, the most frequent narrative is that the mere availability of alternative sources of information will empower political actors that are marginalized by the traditional media controlled by authoritarian regimes. Indeed, the protest movements in authoritarian countries interact creatively with this new medium to get their message across in an environment marked by censorship and repression. Comparing the patterns of Internet use for political mobilization in Egypt and in Tunisia, this article shows how the Internet as a relative free space can be a vital factor in opening windows and expanding the realm of what can be said in public. However, the Internet as such appears not to be sufficient to radically transform the society as a whole. Instead, the case of Egypt shows how traditional media such as the press can serve as a bridge to the general public sphere, helping to operate results of discussions online and to transform the newly acquired space of discussion into actual power on the street.

The use of Internet tools for political protest in the summer of 2009 in Iran, the so-called "Twitter revolution," appears to have conceded a point to Internet enthusiasts, who praise the Internet as a space of unlimited freedom and a venue for the organisation of political actions. Since then, uncensored access to the Internet has been promoted as a means to guarantee free access to information and freedom of expression by American politicians such as Hillary Rodham Clinton. Comparing current censorship of the Internet with the oppression of dissent in dictatorships in the Eastern Bloc, she evoked how non-violent political speech online mirrors the distribution of small pamphlets, which according to her "helped pierce the concrete and concertina wire of the

Iron Curtain." (Rodham Clinton 2010) Analyses of the impact of the Internet in the Middle East have taken a similar line. In the context of rapid adoption of digital communication technologies by developing countries, scholars have voiced hopes that the digital transformation will result in fissures in the foundations of authoritarian rule. These expectations were moderated over time due to the realisation that the Internet does not solely represent opportunities for new discussions in cyberspace, thereby destabilising traditional state power, but quite on the contrary can also enhance state power, notably through the tight control of the Internet by the filtering of undesired content.

In a first study breaking with the mantra of Internet enthusiasts, Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor C. Boas deplore that the impact of the Internet on authoritarian rule has often been treated in an anecdotal and impressionistic fashion, giving in to the conventional wisdom that the Internet is an agent of change without further in-depth investigation (Kalathil and Boas 2003). The comparative method is in their opinion best suited to avoid the danger of conventional wisdom and instead acquire a systematic vision of the phenomenon by putting it into the concrete political context of the country in question. Responding to this call, this article will address the political potential of the Internet in two Arab countries, Egypt and Tunisia, in a systematic examination of evidence for the political impact of political activists' use of the Internet in a most similar case study design. The two selected cases are both considered 'enemies of the Internet' by Reporters without Borders, albeit for different reasons: Tunisia heavily censors the Internet and has sentenced to jail numerous "cyberactivists," while Egypt solely resorts to the latter form of repression.(Reporters without borders 2010). Most importantly, although both countries are often presented as models of political liberalisation, Egypt and Tunisia both feature rigid political regimes in a context of relative resource poverty and rising unemployment rates among the educated youth. Both countries' Presidents, Hosni Mubarak and the former Zine El Abidine Ben Ali have been in charge since 1981 and 1987 respectively, and both regimes attempt to give an appearance of democratic processes while actual

power remains in the hands of few. Given these authoritarian structures, to what extent is the accessibility of the Internet a sufficient condition to generate political activism in the context of political authoritarianism?

In theory, if the Internet is indeed an agent of democratisation as it is claimed by Internet enthusiasts and several Western politicians, a higher Internet connectivity should entail a higher potential for online dissent. Egypt and Tunisia have invested heavily in Internet infrastructure in the hope of attracting foreign investments. The number of Internet users has grown steadily in both countries. Egypt features roughly 21 percent of its population with Internet access, while Tunisia even features 33 percent of its population online. Despite Tunisia's advance in terms of connectivity, it is Egypt that witnessed a first wave of protests organised over the Internet. While online censorship in Tunisia is part of the answer to the question, it is not a sufficient explanation because it can be easily circumvented by simple technical manipulation.

The framework of this study

This study is based on semi-directive interviews with Egyptian and Tunisian bloggers and *Facebook* activists living in their respective countries or in Europe, as well as on online observations. In a first theoretical part, the article will examine the technical features of the Internet that have contributed to a social imaginary of the Internet as an inherently free space, and the Internet's potential for reinserting the lost social aspect into the Habermascian public sphere, and its relation to the traditional media. For this, a recent article by Carola Richter applying Dieter Rucht's linkage of theories of the public sphere with social movement theory to the case of Egypt has induced me to verify her argument in comparing the Egyptian case with Tunisia (Richter 2010). The Internet has witnessed the advent of blogging, which opened up a novel space of discussion and introduced new political actors. More recently, popular interactive Internet applications such as *Facebook* and Twitter are being combined to give way to actual political mobilisations.

The Internet as Playground of the "Netizens"

Forgotten are the days when one could assume that the use of the Internet was nothing more than a temporary fashion, limited to Western young men addicted to novel technologies. In the last decade, we have assisted the democratisation of this communication tool, and for many people in the West the Internet has become an integral part of everyday life. The rise of this new technology and its penetration into almost all spheres of life - together with its clear emphasis on 'textual' representations - result in the fact that the Internet has become the emblem of postmodern society. As a means of communication, the Internet is particular insofar as the connections between various Web resources are not ordered in any hierarchical manner. It is *a priori* technology open to anyone wishing to add new content to it, and this hypothetical equality of all Internet users - as reflected in the construction and the design of the Internet and its endpoints - is an important aspect in explaining why the optimism concerning the transformative power of the Internet is more than a vision of Western politicians, but rather is firmly rooted in the libertarian worldview of the developers and early users of the Internet. (Tuomi 2002) Early adopters like John Perry Barlow saw it as a revolutionary development that does not require the support of state institutions: "the global social space we are building to be naturally independent of the tyrannies [governments] seek to impose us." (Barlow 1996) Its technical features also induced the Internet pioneer John Gilmore to his oft-quoted statement, that "the Net interprets censorship as damage and routes around it." (Elmer-Dewitt 1993) The Internet was presumed to be inherently flexible and amendable, ready to accommodate new forms of social interaction.

The inherent flexibility of the early, relatively anarchic Internet has created a social imaginary of the web that stresses its "control-frustrating" features, although in reality the Internet nowadays largely accommodates government and corporate control (Boas 2006:362). This social imaginary has been integrated into the dialogue of a substantial part of current Internet users, especially by those whose spread information that is usually hard to

come by, for example in authoritarian countries. Web applications such as blogs are argued to remedy at least a few dilemmas of current mass media all over the world, notably the entrustment of the agenda-setting to media professionals. Setting up a blog neither requires much seed capital nor particular managerial skills. In this sense, blogs and webzines resemble other non-mass media such as alternative, grassroots or community media whose production relies on citizen participation. It is even more so in this case because in theory everybody can be a publisher or manage one's own TV station (Downey and Fenton 2003:185). This feature approaches the Internet in terms of the Habermascian public sphere, according to which it is "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens" (Habermas 2001:102).

While the question of universal access to the Internet remains problematic in practice, it can be argued that the Internet as an inherently interactive medium can reinsert the lost social aspect into Habermas' public sphere, meaning that individuals engage in direct, critical dialogue (Norris 2001). This claim rests on the assumption that the Internet's audience is radically different than that of the mass media, that Internet users are the rational, debate-loving citizens characteristic of the public sphere. However, studies have pointed to shortcomings of the Internet, mainly in terms of universal access and unrestricted discussions, because access tends to be dependent on the economic situation, education and ethnicity (Cheeseman Day et al. 2005). In addition, the Internet is far from radically changing the media consumption habits of its users because Internet publishers often post mass-media content (Cavanagh 2007:62). Furthermore, Internet enthusiasts struggle with the fact that the Internet still has a strong elitarian bias, especially in developing countries.

While the Internet has become increasingly widespread in the Western world, ten years ago it used to be characterised by a "strong bias toward affluent males with a high degree of cultural capital," and therefore this new public space was considered to be highly elitist (Dahlgren 2001:47). In its exclusive character, the early Internet is actually close

to the Habermasian prototype of the bourgeois public sphere. However, while limitations for participation in Habermas' model are supposedly temporary, conceptions of online life as an "online citizenry" is not supposed to be universal and is synonymous to an intellectual vanguard (Katz 1997). This category of Internet users is politically aware and actively involved in online communities using the Internet's interactive and participative tools. Since the Internet access in developing countries is even more restricted to an elite than in Western countries, the conception of the netizen as an avant-garde might be even more accurate. However, while Katz points to values such as libertarian ideals, individuality, materialism, tolerance, anti-authoritarianism and a belief in rational debate, nowadays groups with anti-liberal positions such as radical Islamists know very well how to use the Internet for their purposes. For example, the Muslim Brothers have recently started to use 'wikis' to document their own history on the Web[1] (Morozov 2010). If the once praised "new middle class" in authoritarian Arab countries clings to their political positions, the massification of education in the contemporary Muslim world and elsewhere has led to the emergence of new actors and the Internet provides them with a platform to express their beliefs outside of established authority structures (Anderson 2003:47; Eickelman 1992).

Contentious Politics and the Media

Developing countries have witnessed a massive adoption of Internet use while regimes openly aim to discard non-conforming actors from the 'official' public sphere. Fast-growing social network sites like *Facebook* have attracted the attention of media scholars because of their ability to facilitate the formation of *ad hoc* interest groups, whose fellowship can rapidly expand when their concerns are well framed. Therefore, online social networks are not only useful for existing organisations as an instrument to reach an audience, but these websites develop a proper dynamic. Their virtual outreach is often much greater than that of more institutionalised movements. The dynamism of the Internet cannot be ignored by authoritarian regimes, but sometimes leads to erratic reactions. For example, after having called for a boycott of Twitter, the Venezuelan

President Hugo Chavez has now himself acquired a Twitter account "in order to fight the battle in this medium" (Carroll 2010). However, if the Internet offers new voices a rather elitist space of discussion, the question remains how results of discussions online can influence the whole society and transform the newly acquired space of discussion into actual power on the street. To solve this puzzle, the German sociologist Dieter Rucht points to the importance of the reflection of the struggle between the regime and a social movement in the traditional media in an attempt to link theories of the public sphere with social movement theory (Rucht 1994). Social movement theory stresses that the study of social movements has to go beyond the assumption that social movements occur when masses emotionally react to situations outside their control. On the contrary, social movements are rarely spontaneous but rely on careful organisation and resource mobilisation. In order to attract an increasing number of supporters, social movements develop claims that "resonate" with a larger audience. In addition, certain political contexts provide windows of opportunity, favouring potential social movement activity (Wiktorowicz 2004).

Rucht adds to these observations that the reflection of a struggle of a social movement in the media is crucial its success. Authoritarian regimes depend on traditional media such as newspapers to confer on them a minimum of public legitimacy, albeit to a lesser degree than democracies. Even though most traditional media are tightly controlled in authoritarian regimes and therefore often lack credibility in the population, their reaction to confrontations between a regime and a social movement can be seen as an indicator. The battle for public opinion is the "life-blood" of social movements to mobilise followers and to acquire supporters. In a sense "a movement that is not reported does not take place" (Downing 1996:22; Raschke 1985:343). While the Internet can be a first communication strategy to reach usually inaccessible audiences because of restrictions to the freedom of assembly in many authoritarian countries, resonance in the traditional media outlets is necessary to reach a larger portion of the society. In democratic societies, an actor's presence and activities online can attract the media's attention and coverage. In authoritarian countries, a

liberalisation of the media sector can provide an opportunity structure for new actors using the Internet to form coalitions and attract attention.

The following analysis examines the outcomes of distinct approaches of the state towards the press in Egypt and in Tunisia, which have resulted in different opportunity structures. Both countries have witnessed a massive increase in Internet use over the last years and the development of vivid 'blogospheres' defending their right to freedom of speech and increasingly contesting the authoritarian regimes in their countries. Up to the moment of the writing of this article in July 2010, however, only Egypt had witnessed the translation of this new public sphere in actual protests in the Egyptian streets, while the public sphere remained sealed in Tunisia despite efforts to pierce the wall of silence that dominated its public sphere. In January 2011, a protest movement forced Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali out of office, and Egyptians have taken to the streets in millions to end the rule of Hosni Mubarak. Internet tools such as Facebook and Twitter have played a role in the protest, but their significance in supporting the movements remains to be assessed. This article might elucidate certain trends in Internet activism visible in Tunisia and Egypt before the respective regimes fell. For the sake of conciseness, the article will first examine the benefits of blogging in restricted public spheres, and recent attempts of Internet activists to tap into existing social networks using online tools such as *Facebook*.

The Internet as a Tool for Resistance to Oppressive Regimes

The advent of the Internet in semi-authoritarian countries like Egypt and Tunisia has triggered different developments. Both countries have invested heavily in Internet infrastructure and emphasised the importance of information and communication technologies for their economic development. In countries like Egypt and Tunisia, the cost of accessing the net have been reduced considerably so that at least the economic argument does not effectively limit Internet use to a tiny minority anymore. However, although Tunisia is better connected to the Internet than Egypt by official numbers (33 percent versus 21 percent in Egypt), it is the latter that has

witnessed an increased prominence of bloggers beyond the blogosphere and the first anti-Mubarak demonstrations ever.
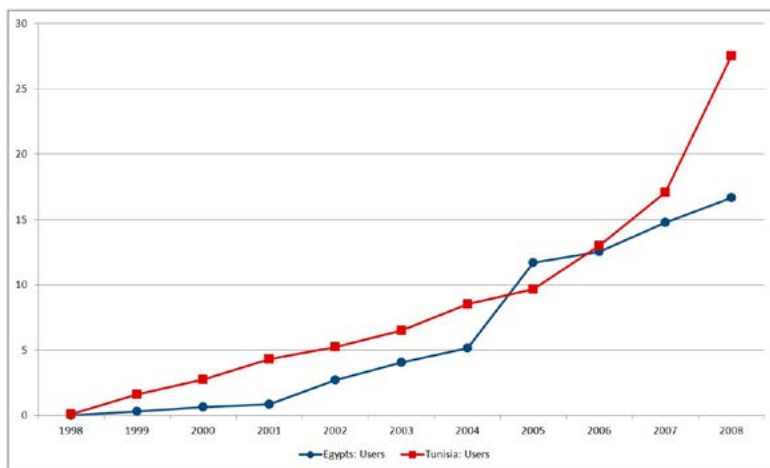

Fig. 1. Development of the number of Internet users per 100 inhabitants. Since 2007, Tunisia (red) is largely ahead of Egypt. (Data: ITU)

This apparent paradox is directly linked to the space the respective governments have allotted alternative voices in the general public sphere. While Egypt has permitted limited liberalisation these last years, which has led to a certain freedom of expression, the Tunisian regime continued to tighten its grip on its society.

Blogging - Enlarging the space for political debate

Egypt's blogosphere is one of the best documented in the Middle East, and activist blogging has had an impact on Egyptian politics, albeit on a small scale. Blogs in Egypt have permitted ordinary citizens not necessarily affiliated with a political party to voice their opinion and to bring issues usually ignored by traditional media due to actual state censorship or journalists' self-censorship to the attention of a wider public. To "spread the word" is the often cited intention which has turned into a veritable slogan. Egypt's best known blogger, Wael Abbas, considered one of the

Most Influential People in the year 2006 by the BBC, has published videos revealing abuse of people in official custody on his blog at *Misr Digital* (Egyptian Awareness) (Abbas, n.d.). Abbas also covered demonstrations calling for change in Egypt, sit-ins and workers strikes, and published videos exposing election fraud and police violence against peaceful demonstrators or pro Mubarak demonstrators. Noha Atef's blog Torture in Egypt (*Al-Tatheeb fi Masr*) is another example of a website aiming at documenting and spreading awareness about human rights abuses in Egypt. Abbas and Atef are examples of bloggers that have challenged traditional journalism through their coverage of otherwise unpublicised events, but the Internet has also itself become the venue for a new form of protest and activism. At the same time, this new space is far from being conflict free. Both in Egypt and Tunisia, different "generations" of bloggers have opposed each other, and occasional gross insults online show how the Internet makes some people lose their inhibitions, which is contrary to Habermas' vision of rational discourse. While the blogosphere cannot live up to Habermascian ideals of rational-critical discourse, the main achievement of political bloggers is to have taken the lead in a new engagement with politics by Arab citizens (Lynch 2007).

Egypt - The Virtual Coffeehouse Takes to the Street

The advent of blogging in Egypt is tied up with the *Kefaya* movement (Egyptian Arabic for "enough"), which gained momentum in 2005 as the first social movement in Egypt that actively used the Internet to organise its events. It set a landmark in organising the first anti-Mubarak demonstrations ever expressing the protesters' anger, featuring the tearing down and the burning of Mubarak posters. This natural symbiosis between Egypt's early core bloggers with the movement has given new popular attention to the Egyptian blogosphere, and bloggers have used their skills to help organise campaigns independently from classical Egyptian opposition politics. Technology-savvy bloggers have also been central in extending the ability of existing political movements to organise, thereby contributing to the formation of an all-encompassing youth movement united by the wish to prevent President Hosni Mubarak from cementing

his rule and installing his son as his successor, paralleling similar umbrellas of diverse political trends linked to Ukraine's Orange Revolution and Poland's Solidarity movement.

Bloggers have also driven internal debate within established political organisations like the Muslim Brotherhood by giving the youth a prominent uncensored platform and thereby upending traditional age hierarchies. Muslim Brotherhood bloggers developed a sub-sphere of the Egyptian blogosphere, but they quickly became activists under the Kefaya movement. In fact, bloggers invest considerable time into their activity and are therefore committed to their chosen field. Political bloggers therefore tend to also be activists and more politically influential than the average citizen, they are opinion-leaders in the Lazarsfeldian sense, which means that they are active media users who interpret the meaning of media content for lower-end media users (Katz and Lazarsfeld 2006:316). These opinion-leaders are long-term activists; Wael Abbas for example hosted an email listserv to spread political information before starting to blog (Isherwood 2008:4). It seems that the Egyptian government tolerates political blogging as a way to let off steam. However, the regime intervenes when certain red lines (religion, the army) are crossed, or when online protest is transformed into protests on the streets. In Egypt, in addition to online protest itself, traditional media such as newspapers have played an important role in alerting the whole population to the youth's actions.

As Carola Richter points out, the Egyptian phenomenon of blogging has grown in importance in conjunction with a timid liberalisation of the printed press and has become known outside the limited space of the Egyptian blogosphere (Richter 2010). There has also been a significant overlap of journalists and bloggers. Some journalists use blogs to write about issues they cannot easily write about in the papers or personal issues, and therefore are themselves an integral part of the blogosphere. Through the publication of firsthand accounts of harassment and torture, bloggers like Malek Mostafa, Wael Abbas and Noha Atef have contributed to an augmented visibility of sensitive topics. Thereby, bloggers challenge the official narrative presented by Egypt's state-run media. On the other hand, communications

technologies have allowed journalists to work in parallel with bloggers and to benefit from the direct contact to activists. The liberalisation of the press in the early 2000s has encouraged the development of the so-called independent media in Egypt. Since 2004 over a dozen independent newspapers have been granted local licenses, but the new broadsheets cannot challenge the traditional governmental-owned newspapers in terms of distribution, since *Al-Ahram*, for example, circulates up to one million copies a day, while the entire independent press together prints less than 200,000 copies (McGrath 2010). While this increased diversity of the Egyptian media landscape has led to more investigative journalism on the whole, covering certain stories remains difficult, since editors fear defamation charges. Therefore, it is not uncommon for journalists to slip information and pictures to bloggers when their own newspaper refuses to publish it because it crosses one of the known "red lines", specifically religion, sex, or the army. There have been co-operations and flows of information enabling bloggers to publicise stories newspapers would self-censor, and some blogs such as Wael Abbas' *Misr Digital* have become must-reads for bloggers and journalists alike (Radsch 2008). In conjunction with the Kefaya movement, bloggers have been further empowered through access to international human rights organisations and international media outlets. In international human rights organisations like Global Voices, bloggers from all over the world associate and form a community. Due to this active networking and the shared Arabic language, the relative success story of Egypt has been transported to other countries in the region. The Tunisian *Yezzi Fock Ben Ali!* campaign (Enough is enough, Ben Ali!) launched on the occasion of World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) hosted by the Government of Tunisia in November 2005, is a clear example of internationally aware Tunisian bloggers using a similar concept.

Tunisia - An Online Community Thwarted by a Repressive Government and a Frightened Society

While Internet activists in Egypt can count on sensationalist national non-governmental media to report their activities, blogging in Tunisia lacks the bridge from an elitist medium to the general public sphere and their impact

remains limited. The Internet is highly censored and traditional media are brought in line with the government. The fight against censorship online and in the real world is the main occupation of Tunisian political bloggers, since they suffer from the fact that Tunisian readers can only access their websites through the use of proxies. Since censorship can be circumvented with relative ease, it certainly constitutes a nuisance and aims at discouraging bloggers, but it cannot disrupt the flow of information completely. Although online discussions and social websites are very popular in Tunisia, national politics are rarely discussed on the popular websites, due to the fact that legal liability for what is consulted and published online is spread over multiple levels, including the national telecommunication agency ATI, Tunisian Internet Service Providers, managers of Internet cafés, administrators of forums and bloggers. As such, charters of Tunisian forums usually stipulate that discussing national politics is banned and bloggers choose to delete "sensitive" commentaries posted by a fellow blogger on their blogs.

Furthermore, bloggers struggle with the fact that they cannot communicate their concerns to a wider audience because the general public sphere is locked. The governmental media deny opposition parties and independent non-governmental organisations coverage and ignore cyberactivism at best, if they do not condemn these initiatives as sponsored by foreign governments. As a consequence, the difficult situation and the sheer impossibility to set up truly independent media have forced established journalists to adopt the cyberspace as a place of refuge. The most prominent example for this development is *Radio Kalima*, led by Human rights activist Sihem Bensedrine, but also the newly founded online magazine *Kapitalis* of former correspondent of *Jeune Afrique* and editor in chief of *L'Expression*, Ridha Kéfi, a news portal specialised in, but not limited to economics, promising to present "the news differently" (Mekki 2010). Since dismissal from *L'Expression* in 2008, Ridha Kéfi has continued to write for magazines such as *New African*, *African Business* and *African Banker*, and will start to write for *La Revue* recently launched by the founder of *Jeune Afrique*, Béchir Ben Yahmed. All these publications are published in Paris. As such, he is an example for high quality journalists who cannot properly exercise their profession in Tunisia and therefore resort to freer spaces such as foreign publications and the Internet, since at least there

is no necessity to acquire a legal visa to launch a magazine. However, the retreat of independent journalists to the Internet indicates that they cannot serve as a bridge between the elitist space of the Internet and the general public sphere.

The growing migration of critical voices to the Internet in Tunisia is problematic insofar as it becomes increasingly difficult to assess their impact. For example, information websites countering the rampant misinformation through governmental media are prominent in the Tunisian web. *Tunisnews*, a former mailing list and now a website that re-publishes Internet news, articles, analysis and information that are deemed relevant to the public in Tunisia by a team of volunteers since late 1999, admit themselves on their website that they "have no clear idea about the scope of [their] audience" (Tunisnews – FAQ 2010). It is difficult to measure to what extent material published on this listserv is actually printed out and spread inside the country. Given the fact that the regime encourages an atmosphere of fear and favours quietism, it is doubtful that communiqués published through *Tunisnews* reach beyond an already "converted" intellectual elite. Furthermore, since the team of *Tunisnews* consists of many exiled Islamists, some accuse them of an ideological bias. The problem of blogs in general is that an average Internet user rarely stumbles upon them while browsing through the net and this is amplified in Tunisia through censorship by the state. Therefore we can assume that many Tunisians are not aware of critical blogs, while *Tunisnews* has at least built up a web presence for 10 years. Contrary to the situation in Egypt, where a freshly liberalised media serve as an amplifier of revelations launched by the blogosphere, a public discussion of Tunisian government policies does not take place, whatever domain they touch, and given that Tunisian censorship is tacit, it is nearly impossible to discuss it even in the most liberal Tunisian mass media outlets like *Réalités*.

The Internet as Refuge for Political Dissent

Whereas some independent local Egyptian newspapers mention the alarming videos of torture and mistreatment of ordinary citizens at police stations, similar stories in Tunisia remain untold. In a statement issued in

December 2009, the National Committee for the Defence of Freedom of Expression and the Press in Tunisia proclaimed that the measures implemented by the authorities had established "unilateral, stagnant and backward media," who acted as a "tool of totalitarian propaganda" (Arfaoui 2009). Occasionally the Tunisian government sets examples to show that pursuing investigative journalism is hazardous[2] (Hunt 2009). In fact, the Tunisian government has succeeded in pushing liberal Tunisian journalists to migrate to the Internet. The most prominent example for this development is *Radio Kalima*, led by Human rights activist Sihem Bensedrine. *Kalima* was originally intended to be an independent newspaper, but Bensedrine was unable to obtain the official permission to publish *Kalima* in Tunisia. It was therefore established as an independent Internet-based news site, but later expanded to broadcast via satellite to reach those without computers. Moreover, Ben Ali has recently indicated that his government seeks to introduce legislation regulating online journalism. While some applaud this initiative because it will enable online journalists to acquire an official accreditation and to be represented in the Tunisian Journalist Union, others fear that the state will use this tool to bring online journalism better under control. In a sense, both regimes' attitude toward Internet sites is similar to their stance towards traditional media. Egypt rarely shuts down newspapers and it rarely exercises prior censorship. Instead it uses subtle ways to punish dissent, such as the harassment of families of dissidents, the arrest of targeted journalists, and smear campaigns co-ordinated by the government press. Tunisia also practices these subtle repressions, but it does not allow the mere voicing of dissent in the public sphere, be it in newspapers or online.

Given this very different initial situation, blogging has had a very different effect in Egypt and Tunisia. While in both cases it allowed new, often young, voices to be heard, its impact was by far more limited in Tunisia since the sheer possibility of occasional visitors is reduced by the Tunisian approach to Internet blockage. The advent of social network sites promised to remedy the poor reach of blogs because social networks attract a growing number of Egyptians and Tunisians due to the network effect. The presence of over 12 percent of the Tunisian population on *Facebook* promised to be

a resource which activists want to tap, since the Egyptian experience had already shown that organising protest over *Facebook* can be highly effective. A *Facebook* group calling for a general strike in solidarity with the workers in Mahalla had rapidly accumulated more than 70,000 members in a span of two weeks at a time when there are only 800,000 active *Facebook* users in Egypt, and "the eerie emptiness of the normally teeming streets of Cairo" was newsworthy and therefore widely publicised (Slackman 2008). The Egyptian regime reacted by arresting key activists like George Ishak, and Esraa Abdel Fattah, the 27-year old who originally started the *Facebook* group ahead of the planned rally. On 5 April 2008 the Egyptian Minister of the Interior threatened "immediate and firm measures against any attempt to demonstrate, disrupt road traffic or the running of public establishments and against all attempts to incite such acts" (Makary and Singer 2008). The reaction of the Egyptian government showed that the potential for mobilisation over social network websites created resonance beyond the sphere of social network users. As Faris puts it, "April 6th was the day when organising toll (Web 2.0) met political reality to create elements that were strong enough to form storm clouds on the regime's horizon" (Faris 2008). However, if the solidarity strike received substantial media coverage because of its exceptionality, the subsequently emerging April 6 movement proved to be much less effective. Because the movement failed to propose a coherent agenda or to present outstanding personalities supporting their goals, the media attention declined. In addition to the absence of elaborate frames, the Egyptian regime cracked down on the organisers of the strike, thereby setting an example showing that activism is bound to bear individual cost.

Protest at the Fingertips – The Potential of Facebook Activism

Facebook has provided an unprecedented opportunity for activists to reach a wider audience than that is usually reached by blogs. On the other hand, the solidarity strike of April 6, 2008 and a demonstration in Tunisia for freedom of expression online point to the weakest aspect of protest organised via *Facebook*. The initiative of "une manifestation réelle pour une liberté virtuelle" (real protest for virtual freedom), scheduled for May 22, 2010,

a reaction to an increasing number of critical blogs banned during April and May 2010, was the first attempt to bring online protest onto the streets of Tunisia. The campaign, called "Seyyeb Saleh" (traditional curse in Tunisian dialect, meaning "leave me alone") started on *Facebook* and Twitter before establishing its own website. By the time of the demonstration, groups like "Le "404 Not Found" nuit gravement à l'image de Mon Pays" (The "404 Not Found" seriously damages the image of My Country) and "'Aridha li 'ashar alaaf tonisi dhid al- riqaba al- Eliktroniyya wa al-hajb" (Petition of ten thousand Tunisians against electronic control and filtering) gathered 7,777 and 11,457 followers respectively. In addition to the demonstration in Tunis, solidarity protests were planned in Paris, Brussels, Bonn, New York and Montreal. The organisers declared that the event was independent of any political party or association, and the sole demand was the abolition of Internet censorship and the reopening of all sites censored. However, the demonstration in Tunis was called off when the organisers were summoned to the Ministry of Interior. To the deception of protestors, Tunisians chose to stay home, and a reinforced police guard was crisscrossing Avenue Bourguiba and surrounding streets to prevent any attempt to rally (Associated Press 2010). This episode indicates the main challenge of *Facebook* activism, namely rather low commitment of participants.

While *Facebook* features useful tools to organise an event and combines these tools with the characteristics of social networks, the actual events were frequented by much less people than foreseen. While the general strike in Egypt proved to be relatively effortless and riskless because people were only asked to stay at home, the aborted rally in Tunisia makes the low commitment of *Facebook* users for public turnout evident. Eventually, clicking on a button is an easy form of proclaiming approval. The reason why Tunisians seem apparently more risk-averse than Egyptians may be related to the mechanisms of repression that reign in the country and have eclipsed most extra-governmental assistance programmes available in other countries (Hibou 2006). Another explanation might be that the critical mass of contention has not yet been reached, so people are still too scared to engage in politics. However, the recent wave of indiscriminate censorship affecting a great number of bloggers and not

anymore targeting the very dissent and political blogs and websites has shaken the Tunisian Web. This indiscriminate censorship might be the reason why the frames proposed by freedom of speech advocates find a greater echo now than before. Contrary to previous waves of increased blockages, this time even more mainstream websites were touched than before. Since April 23, 2010, Tunisia was blocking both platforms in line with the opposition party *Ettajdid* (former communist party, authorised) blog "Friends of Attariq" and the weekly online *Attariq al-Jadid* (The New Way). But with the blocking of websites such as *Flickr*, censorship touches more Web 2.0 tools than ever before. According to Lina Ben Mehenna, professor at Tunisia's April 9 University and writer for *Global Voices*,

> Past campaigns against censorship were mainly sponsored by elite politicians and rights activists as the blocking was mainly directed at political and news websites, but it has now moved to websites that have nothing to do with politics, including photo, video, and music sharing websites, cooking websites, and even those dealing with arts and theatre. (Dbara 2010)

This has resulted in an unprecedented form of protest, which can already be considered a success insofar as even this minor form of protest is deemed to be risky. While *Facebook* was intended to reproduce a network of 'offline' friends, *Facebook* activists usually attract a large group of followers they do not necessarily know in person. As *Facebook* is supposedly infiltrated by agents of the state, many Tunisian activists anxiously investigate the background of a new person among their other "*Facebook* friends." This is particularly true for activists like Liopatra who seek to preserve their anonymity (Interview, Tunis, July 13, 2009). The use of *Facebook* as a tool for mobilisation in authoritarian regimes is therefore not without its challenges. It is therefore not a sufficient means of organisation, but other factors such as increased attention of traditional media can contribute to create a climate facilitating political mobilisation.

"We Use Whatever Medium is Available to Us"

Contrary to Tunisia, Egyptian initiatives like Kefaya and the April 6 movement have received a considerable media echo in the country. Although these movements suffered from internal dissent and a lack of clear-cut frames, the phenomenon of cyberactivism has acquired a certain notoriety. It seems that Egyptian cyberactivism has achieved a critical mass, making protest an accepted action, albeit online. It remains to be seen how many of the roughly 230,000 online supporters of ElBaradei, former Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and a prominent advocate for a constitutional reform, is going to engage in further campaigning. This number, however, has become an unprecedented indicator of discontent of the youth with the current state and their hope that ElBaradei could bring about change. While Egyptian newspapers conspicuously note the growth of the group and speculate about its significance, Tunisian media take note of general figures like the total number of *Facebook* users, warn of possible dangers to society and ignore political initiatives when they touch Tunisian politics and, for example, not Palestine. Furthermore, in light of the extensive monitoring of the web by Tunisian authorities, cyberactivism remains costly. Ordinary Tunisians might fear that joining a group online could be monitored and entail negative consequences. Yet, a major advantage of *Facebook* as opposed to blogs resides in the difficulty of censoring it. While Tunisia blocks even selected *Facebook* sites, the activities of the blocked person or group remain in the 'newsfeed,' and the dissemination of information cannot be cut entirely. Furthermore, censorship inside *Facebook* is particularly obvious compared to the general cyberspace, since all websites inside *Facebook* are automatically linked with each other, making broken links very unlikely. This obvious censorship might in time anger even apparently apolitical users, who see themselves confronted with an increasing number of blocked websites. The temptation to tap into this reservoir of discontent youth is great. At the same time, some activists point to the risks of increasingly invading the private space with politics. Activists such as Selim Ben Hassem are concerned that this invasion of the private sphere could, after a short period of curiosity for this new way of political dissent, result in

a further retreat and alienation of the general population. (Interview, Paris, April 18, 2010) In order to attract usually 'apolitical' Tunisian Internet users, the anti-censorship campaign was framed as a one-issue campaign and does not address general political issues.

Campaigns such as Kefaya, April 6, Yezzi and the unprecedented Internet campaign against censorship in Tunisia clearly indicates the need of fresh air for a youth suffocated by authoritarian regimes. The Internet has been chosen as a venue for the organisation of protests because it is, despite attempts to limit its reach, a relatively free space, in the context of the impossibility to legally assemble large groups. While organisers risk bearing the costs of their political engagement, the Internet has allowed ordinary citizens to acquire information formerly inaccessible to them. The phenomenon of blogs, which used to be marginal, has become commonplace in Egypt, and increasingly so in Tunisia as well (Radsch 2008). While Egyptian young activists contribute their share in the building of an opposition movement headed by ElBaradei, Tunisian activists want to resist an increasingly oppressive regime. In what is often said to be apolitical societies, young people are dissatisfied with the regime and find an outlet in the Internet where they can first voice their anger, sharpen their arguments, and eventually organise political protest, creatively using all the tools at their disposition to push their cause. The recent successful overthrow of President Ben Ali, after 23 years in power, has shown that the Tunisian population was capable to transform their anger from quiet discontent to virulent opposition to the regime.

Conclusion

Internet enthusiasts have nourished high hopes that the accessibility of the Internet will promote the emergence of a space of expression free of governmental intervention. In the context of authoritarian regimes, the Internet is seen in line with other media as driver of political modernisation. Indeed, despite the attempts of authoritarian governments to prevent the emergence of challengers through the Internet, the medium has the potential to provide a space for opinion exchange between young, well-

educated actors, who are often excluded from the political realm. While censorship remains an issue of great concern, governments have not been able to stifle the expression of dissent online and to prevent the increasing use of technology to strengthen communication and co-ordination among opposition and civil society activists. Blocking access to certain websites serves to channel the mass of average users away from unwanted content, but it does not deter those desirous to voice dissent, since they can find ways to avoid official control with relative ease. Political activism remains risky, but this is true for both cases, Egypt and Tunisia.

The assumption that the uncensored accessibility of the Internet encourages the struggle for democracy has to be differentiated. At first sight, the case studies seem to confirm the statement, since Egypt, featuring a usually uncensored access to the Internet, has witnessed mass mobilisations organised over the Internet while Tunisia had not. However, the mere availability of freely accessible Internet is not a sufficient condition insofar as mobilisations in Egypt took place when a relative small portion of the population had Internet access and, on the other hand, mobilisation witnessed a decline between 2005 and 2008 although the number of Internet users rose during the same period. As there is no direct correlation between increased Internet use and political action organised through this medium, we have to assume a more complex relationship. A successful social movement seems to need more than a virtual space of debate to be successful, although such a space can be an important complementary factor in opening windows and expanding the realm of what can be said in public.

A political movement revolves around a core of key actors, and "netizens" qualify for this task. The Internet also features a variety of tools that facilitate the organisation of events. However, to be successful, social movements need more than a well-organised campaign. In Egypt, we witnessed an important interaction between print and online media, between the representatives of a relative elitist medium and the traditional, more accessible print media. A social movement needs to provide frames resonating with grievances of the public coupled with periods of increased public attention to politics in order to create opportunity structures.

To further transport their message and to attract supporters, a reflection of the struggle of the movement with the government in the "classical" media such as newspapers and television channels is necessary to give the movement momentum outside the Internet context.

In the Tunisian case, Internet censorship is a mere symptom of a generally highly constrained public sphere. Online mobilisation had failed to gain greater support until the writing of this paper because the frames proposed to the public were not powerful enough and the risks associated with political activism are perceived to be high. The frame provided by the recent freedom of expression campaign created a greater echo because censorship has become pervasive. However, in light of the Egyptian experience, the Tunisian campaign might have needed the dead of Mohamed Bouzizi to create a frame resonating beyond Internet users to attain a critical mass sufficient to encourage more citizens to join their cause without a reflection of their struggle in the media.

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Johanne Kuebler

Notes

[1] Wikis are allows the collective creation and editing of interlinked web pages.

[2] In December 2009, a Tunisian court sentenced Zouhair Makhlouf, editor of the opposition newspaper and organ of the Democratic Progressive Party Al-Maoukif and news website Essabil Online, to three months in prison for publishing a damaging interview without consent. Makhlouf was doing an investigative documentary about environmental pollution in the industrial area of Nabeul in northeast Tunisia.

Beyond the Traditional-Modern Binary: Faith and Identity in Muslim Women's Online Matchmaking Profiles

Anna Piela

Abstract:

Finding a suitable partner in both diasporic and non-diasporic settings proves increasingly challenging for young Muslims, especially those unable or not wanting to search within their kinship networks. At the same time, religious matchmaking websites are becoming increasingly common especially among Muslim women. As studies of Muslim matchmaking sites tend to focus on the ever-popular topic of the headscarf and its associations in the matchmaking context, a much more comprehensive study of the specificity of the online religious identities and self-representation is required. This paper examines a number of profiles of young Muslim women using online matchmaking sites and discusses broad themes of faith, ethnicity and identity that emerge in the analysis.

Introduction

Questions about the role of online matchmaking in the lives of Muslims are, inevitably, posed in the context of the often disputed binary: traditional/arranged and non-traditional/own choice of marriage partner. Researchers note that gender ideals, gender relations and roles are evolving in postcolonial diasporic settings (Dwyer 2000). Traditional and non-traditional perspectives on marriage and sexuality are competing and both depend on age, class, education and faith positioning (Petersen and Donnenwerth 1997). Literature on Muslim online matchmaking is very fragmentary, possibly because online matchmaking, whether in secular or religious contexts, is largely a product of the last decade. Most studies of online matchmaking in specific national or cultural contexts recognize the

Corresponding author: Anna Piela, University of York, York, YO10 5DD, UK. E-mail: annapiela@gmail.com

increasing significance of this phenomenon in the process of selecting a suitable marriage partner. However, they tend to differ in the evaluation of matchmaking opportunities that technology offers.

While not focusing on just Muslims but the Nigerian context in general[1] Adesina and Ayodele (2004:104,110) discuss online matchmaking in terms of the challenge it poses to the 'contemporary Nigerian family'. They refer to it as 'an area of concern', along with online gambling, pornography, paedophilia and other forms of 'cyber-carnality.' However, in their conclusions they introduce a more positive perspective on online matchmaking, as they suggest that it has the capacity to strengthen the national Nigerian unity through inter-tribal and inter-religious marriages. The way in which Adesina and Ayodele contrast traditional matchmaking organized by families and online matchmaking indicates that the concepts of individualism, 'detachment from family ties' and abandonment of religious values go hand in hand with the use of technology.

These conclusions are questioned by other studies (admittedly conducted in different locations). For example, Bunt (2009:104) argues that online matchmaking is a practice that indicates flexibility and practicality strongly overarched by religious and cultural norms. In fact, matchmaking executed online may reinforce traditional practices, as it may still be carried out by family members who participate in decision-making regarding selecting candidates out of the entire pool of service users. Bunt writes:

> Inherent cultural-religious concepts associated with male-female relationships – including *purdah*, engagement, and betrothal – are challenged, adjusted and compensated by technology. They retain an implicit, familiar, deep-rooted Islamic core.

Bunt further notes that, in principle, Islamic authorities are not against online matchmaking, as long as *halal* (permissible) practices are observed and the purpose of the interaction is marriage[2]. This is significant as it demonstrates that a marriage may be both Islamic and non-traditional (not

arranged by family members) at the same time. In one of the success stories published by MuslimMatch.com and cited by Bunt, two young people from different cultures and countries 'spot each other', establish that they are suitable for each other and make marriage vows. As the groom writes, 'she [the bride] has already informed her parents about her decision. They have no objections. The same applies to me' (Bunt, 2009:106).

It is possible that the indication of such websites' purpose and permissibility lies in the terminology they use. While many of them define themselves as 'marriage oriented' and use the term *matchmaking* (mediating between two parties in order to bring about a marriage between them), there are also sites used by Muslims that exist for the purpose of *online dating*; this denotes online meetings with potential romantic partners which may or may not result in marriage (Galal 2003).

In my PhD research (Piela 2009) I addressed online matchmaking as one of the issues related to partner choice in the lives of Muslim women. Participants in my study highlighted two reasons why online matchmaking may be a useful option: firstly, there are Muslims existing without a Muslim family network, in particular converts, as also pointed out by Lo and Aziz (2009), and other Muslims without families, for example orphans, in the diaspora. They may find it much harder to find a Muslim spouse without kinship support. Secondly, contrary to the pervasive stereotype of tightly-knit Muslim families and networks that almost always influence individual decisions, there are many cases where the parents are not interested in investing effort into arranging their children's marriages. One participant in the study described her family as 'dysfunctional' specifically because her parents refused to suggest suitable spouses, and she was glad to have had the opportunity to seek out a husband on the Internet and relieved that she did not have to go through personal dating to get to know him.

The consequences of remaining unmarried are harsher for women in Muslim communities. Single women may be ridiculed as unattractive but at the same time perceived as a potential threat to the honor of the family (Imtoual and Hussein 2009:28). Imtoual and Hussein note that difficulties

in finding a suitable husband result for many unmarried, divorced and widowed Muslim women in having to cope with unfulfilled sexual desires as their adulthood is defined by celibacy, a state regarded in Islam with unease as marriage is expected of faithful Muslims (Lo and Aziz 2009).

Online matchmaking is considered a convenient solution to this problem by many women who comfortably create their new online identities in order to attract a Muslim husband. Zwick and Chelariu (2006:381) write: 'the new medium requires a whole new language with which to construct a desirable and marketable digital persona'. Unsurprisingly, according to research that investigated which traits were most desirable in future spouses among U.S. Muslims, religiosity was listed at the top (Badahdah and Tiemann, 2005). Significantly, 'a greater percentage of women than men listed religiosity as a characteristic they sought in a mate and they were more likely to describe themselves as religious than were the men' (Badahdah and Tiemann, 2009:84). In their discussion, Badahdah and Tiemann conclude that religiosity is highly desirable for Muslims of both genders because religiosity in a mate is required by the Qur'an, but they do not explain the finding related to women's stronger emphasis on religiosity both in themselves and their potential partners.

Lo and Aziz list three types of Muslim matchmaking services that can be found online: local ones, based around mosques in relatively small communities, where imams fulfill the function of the matchmaker by keeping lists of those looking for spouses and literally matching them together; organization-based ones, where national Islamic organizations like ISNA have sections of their websites devoted to matchmaking. They use demographic information as the main indicator of compatibility. Finally, there are commercially-driven websites that are Muslim versions of general dating websites where one has to purchase membership to exchange messages with other members but which give an opportunity to build an extensive personal profile with pictures. As opposed to the first two types where the matchmaking involves entire kinship networks (i.e. it is the parents who put up the matrimonial ads), the third type attracts singles looking for spouses independently. Lo and Aziz (2009:17) conclude the comparison by saying:

> It gives users, especially women, who make up the overwhelming percentage of participants, the ability and opportunity to express their personal issues, concerns, ambitions and feelings. Expressing this range of choices is not often available or allowed in the traditional intermediary system, or in those *pro bono* Islamic sites that harbour traditional Muslim dating values.

Zwick and Chelariu (2006:381) argue similarly:

> By encouraging an individualistic pursuit of wants and needs, competition, and commodification of the self, the online matchmaking site [of type 3] promotes efficient and effective spouse searching rather than adherence to cultural conventions.

As this paper aims to explore the diversity of Muslim women's online self-expression, including their perspectives on marriage and religion, it concentrates on personal profiles populating commercially-driven websites, type 3 of the matchmaking services described above.

Data and method

The matchmaking websites

There is a multitude of commercially-driven Muslim matchmaking websites. I was able to identify two that fulfilled all the necessary criteria (independently posted ads, a sophisticated search engine, and the platform adapted to needs of Muslims in terms of design) and allowed me to read the profiles (which were open-access) without an account. Whilst many Muslim matchmaking websites allow believers of any religion to join (despite the fact that Muslim women are expected to marry only Muslim men and Muslim men are limited to the believers amongst the 'People of the Book', a group comprising Muslims, Christians, and Jews, but excluding Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists and other religions), I have selected two websites that mainly targeted Muslims.

Website A[3] markets itself as a 'serious Muslim marriage website' for 'serious people'. It is global in scope in that it allows selection of any country of origin and 'any country' is a default search category. The sign-up process is straightforward; the only religion-related question presents 7 possible answers: 'Just a Muslim', 'Muslim - Hanbali', 'Muslim - Hanafi', 'Muslim - Shafi', 'Muslim - Maliki', 'Muslim - Shia', and 'Other'. The emphasis is clearly on different Sunni *madhabs* (sects) of Islam, while divisions in Shiism are unacknowledged and other religions are combined together in one category. Other Muslim groups, such as the Salafi, Sufi, or unorthodox versions of Islam are not mentioned as an option at all. The only options related to the marital state are 'Never married', 'Divorced', or 'Widowed', precluding already married men looking for a second, third, or a fourth wife from signalling this fact.

On Website B the signup process is more complex and more information is required. The 'Religion' section contains seven questions: 'Religiousness' ('very religious', 'religious', 'somewhat religious', 'not religious', 'prefer not to say'); 'Hijab' ('yes', 'no', 'prefer not to say'); 'Beard' ('yes', 'no', 'prefer not to say'); 'Are you a revert[4] to Islam?' ('yes', 'no'); 'How strict are you about Halal?' ('I always keep halal', 'I usually keep halal', 'I keep halal at home only', 'I do not keep halal'); How often do you perform Salaah[5]? ('Always', 'Usually', 'Sometimes', 'Never'). This degree of detail allows others to narrow their searches to candidates whose views on religion they can accept. One can set the search only to candidates who are very religious, wear a hijab or a beard, always keep halal, and always perform the prayer (or otherwise), thus streamlining the search for a spouse. Website B offers a wider choice of answers on the marital state – in addition to the three given by Website A, it lists 'Legally separated' and 'Anulled' - but it does not include 'Married' either. Finally, Website B automatically transfers its visitors to national branches (detecting IP numbers of users' computers); thus the profiles I browsed and selected for the purpose of this paper were mostly based in the U.K.

Both websites include questions on ethnicity or country of origin, citizenship, and living arrangements, as well as level of education, occupation and

other 'standard' questions included by matchmaking/dating websites (age, personal qualities, desired qualities in the spouse, etc.) Both websites also set the minimum age of members as 18 – the legal marriage age in most Western countries.

Profiles

A random sample of 33 women's profiles has been selected from the two websites described above. The only criteria for selection were the presence of a photo and a developed profile. Statistical data on the participants is as follows: 36% are divorced while 63% never married; 84% (27) are based in the UK, 3% (1) in Singapore, 6% (2) in Indonesia, 3% (1) in the Seychelles, and 6% (2) in the USA. Mean age in the sample is 32; 9% (3) of participants are in the age group 18-24: 67% (11) in the age group 25-34:, 27% (9) are in the age group 35-45. The youngest participant is 21 and the oldest is 48.

Many participants indicate educational achievements: 6% (2) list their highest degree as Masters; 58% (19) have a Bachelor's degree; a further 15% (5) list a non-degree professional qualification. Some 15% (5) have completed high school, while 6% (2) did not reveal their educational status but indicated they worked in managerial jobs. In terms of the level of Islamic faith 12% (4) indicated they were 'very religious', 24% (8) defined themselves as 'religious', 54% (18) 'somewhat religious', 6% (2), 'not very religious' and 3% (1) did not specify a level of faith.

The analysis process

The analysis of the data, obtained through virtual ethnography (Hine 2000), was facilitated by the use of Atlas ti, a computer package designed to aid in data coding and organisation. Computer-assisted analysis in qualitative research differs considerably form quantitative analysis in that the computer does not calculate, but helps manipulate and present relevant fragments of data. I decided to use Atlas ti for a number of reasons: firstly, it allows the handling of much more data than the process of manual analysis; secondly, it enables the researcher to assign codes to fragments

of text which can be later retrieved according to the code, thus giving a great deal of control and acceleration to the process of retrieving relevant segments; thirdly, it allows quick access to the context of a quote which is relevant in the analysis process since codes and quotes can be linked and displayed visually to facilitate systematic comparison of data; and finally, it helps to assess the counterevidence for alternative interpretations of data (Joffe and Yardley 2004:64).

All quotes from participants' profiles are in their original form, and I have maintained all typographical errors and emphases, with a few exceptions where I specifically mentioned that emphasis was mine. Preserving the original form of the data, with its typographical errors, was a conscious decision, as I agree with Markham (2004:153) that rewriting participants' contributions may be ethically problematic.

Emerging themes

Religion

The extent to which religion plays a leading role in construction of profiles differs in the cases, as do the ways in which the concept of religion is employed to construct one's profile. Participants referred to religion in describing their own qualities, convictions and interests, as well as in defining their expectations of a perfect husband and marriage. Religion comes across as a very dynamic process and participants often mention that developing knowledge of Islam is one of the key activities they would like to share with their future husbands. Sometimes marriage to a knowledgeable Muslim is perceived as an act that would literally bring them back on the path of Islam:

> (...) and most important - [I want] someone with in touch with their deen as I hope the process of marriage betters me as a muslim. Inshallah. (Fazila H, UK)
> I am learning more about my deen and try to pray 5 times a day. When Mr Right comes along will like to share my knowledge and learn more from eachother. (Asma, UK)

This perception of marriage as a religious act, in conjunction with the religious self-assessment of 54% of the participants as 'somewhat religious' further suggests an intention of many participants to raise their level of faith and commitment to Islam. Marriage is also understood as an act of *completion* of one's faith, a crowning of one's Islamic path, and some women refer to a hadith that reports Prophet Muhammad's praise of marriage as 'half of the faith' (Hassouneh-Phillips 2001:932)

> My religion is important to me and I thank Allah for helping me through each test. Now I feel its time for me to complete my deen and share my life with someone special. (Sania, UK)

There is no embarrassment or awkwardness due to the independent online searching for a husband, noted by Hanvey (2010) as a common characteristic of individuals participating in online dating. On the contrary, the participants claim that they are responsible for selecting a candidate that would be most appropriate for them. One of them quoted the Qur'an to justify her actions:

> Allah will not change the condition of people as long as they do not change their state [themselves]. [Quran: Ar-Ra'd: 11] (Lei10, UK)

Participants rarely define a 'good Muslim', although in a few cases the profiles were built around a detailed description of the religious positioning (strength of faith, practices, knowledge and sect belonging) of the ideal candidate:

> In my own words: I am looking to find a good Muslim brother that is on his deen. Full of taqwa, that has high iman, and can recite qua'ran knowing it with tasfiir. He has to be a passionate Muslim from the heart and follow the sunnah of the profit purely. He needs to pray five times a day, and be a man that will allow his wife to pray in the Musjid. Also I would prefer someone that is an American Revert. (Alia, United States)

The expectation that the husband will not object to Alia praying in the mosque can be better understood in the context of the study by Bagby, Perl and Froehles (2001) who found that women accounted for only 15% of those praying in U.S. mosques, in contrast to men who make up 78%. One of the factors affecting these proportions may be the fact that according to most religious interpretations, only men are required to attend jum'ah prayer (the Friday congregational prayer). However, in some places, like the politically active Detroit Muslim population, mosque attendance amongst women is as high as 37% (Jamal 2005:56). Another religious preference for marrying a revert, expressed in Alia's profile, is frequent amongst other converts and some 'born Muslims' (there is even a specialized matchmaking website at www.marryaconvert. com):

> I am particularly interested in getting to know brothers who have reverted to islam. (MissLovely, Seychelles)

> It would be nice to meet a revert like myself so we can learn Islam together at a steady pace. (StarryEyes, UK)

However, the most frequent requirement amongst women who define themselves as religious is that the man is a "good Muslim", regardless of ethnicity and status:

> I am looking for a muslim, cast, status, job, money....not an issue (Naseema, UK)

> I am in no way a traditional Pakistani and Im not looking for a traditional Pakistani hubby!!! IM a muslim and im lookin 4 a muslim!!! (Sayeeda, UK)

> It does not matter if the brother is a revert or a born Muslim. As long as he is a practising brother of good character & personality. (Sameera, Singapore)

Amongst women who made a reference to polygamy in their profile, none expressed an interest in being a co-wife. Those who do speak about their previous experiences in polygamous relationships have concluded that this type of marriage is not suitable for them. However, the institution of polygamy is not challenged (as it is permitted in some circumstances by the Qur'an), but rather there is the personal preference for being the only wife:

> I do not wish to lie but i am not keen in becoming or going as a co-wife. As a Muslim i am not against Polygamy but as a woman i am uncomfortable with the idea as i really wish to love this person with all my heart till the very end so I would find it difficult to share him. May Allah(swa) forgive my weakness. (Sameera, Singapore)

> I have previously been married twice, both times as a co-wife, both times the situations did not work out due to external factors, allah knows best. although i have no problems with the issue of being a co-wife, i would prefer to marry a single brother 4 the reason of simplicity and inshala the option to take a 2nd/3rd/4th wife is something a husband has the right 2 do if circumstances permit, and allah knows best..(Afsoon, UK)

As in my previous research on women's views on polygamy (Piela 2011), polygamy in this analysis comes across (according to participants) as a type of relationship that a Muslim woman may wish to avoid, for example by stating so in her marriage contract, and still be a 'good Muslim'.

'Culture' and ethnic backgrounds

'Culture', a term used very frequently by the participants, had very negative connotations in the analyzed profiles. It usually denoted customs and traditions of ethnic groups in which Islam is the dominant religion and that have merged with interpretations of Islam espoused by these cultural groups. This is a commonly expressed view in Muslim women's online

debates (Piela 2011), other Islamic 'cyber-environments' (Bunt 2009) and in general discussions amongst Muslims (Ramadan 2009:184) that many Muslims have failed to achieve an understanding of what is Islamic[6] and what is 'cultural', causing many customs to be mistakenly considered as Islamic (Ramadan 2004:139). Consequently, these are blamed for contamination of Islamic practices and beliefs. This 'Islam vs. culture' narrative is a very prevalent interpretative repertoire[7] in Muslim discussions on the nature of Islam, for example among Muslim feminists who argue that patriarchal applications of Islamic sources have been an unfortunate outcome of specific culture-based interpretations (Barlas 2006). Accordingly, the participants strongly express their opposition to mere 'cultural' sentiments contrasting them with teachings of Islam:

> If you are more into your culture & don't know the importance of our Deen, well don't bother emailing me (Aleesha, UK)

> I don't mix culture with religion, and being a Muslim comes straight from my heart. (Alia, United States)

> Im NOT after a mummies boy ribbon wrapped in a chocolate box of culture lacking a backbone for filling. [If you are] hanging onto mama jiis apron strings and culture and have no Islamic values or practice, then seriously guys, please DONT contact me. Im not interested in the said cultural nonsense. (LL70, UK)

The sarcastic reference to 'mama jii's apron strings' made by LL70 suggests her opposition to 'culture' and scorn regarding the strong bond between men and their mothers that holds late into adulthood, a phenomenon present in many patriarchal cultures including India and Pakistan (Michaelson and Goldschmidt 1971). In addition, the participants tend to cut themselves off from what they see as mechanisms and prejudices common in the Asian Muslim community:

> I'd like to marry someone whose family don't play politics like most Asian families do. (Razia, UK)

> No guys whose parents would disown you if you took a white
> wife home (LL70, UK)

The contemporary association of Islam with particular ethnic groups in the
common consciousness, as literature evidences, in both traditionally Muslim
(Zeleza 2005:5) and non-Muslim majority contexts (Gorak-Sosnowska
2007), and racist prejudice against converts in some communities result
in social difficulties the latter face post-conversion. Racial discrimination
among Muslims has been discussed by Karim (2008), who explored the
factors that contribute to the emergence and enforcement of divisions
within the American Muslim community. Karim (2008:142) reported
that in predominantly Asian Muslim contexts suspicion towards converts
(both white and African-American) resulted in converts overcoming racial
divisions socially and creating 'convert communities'.

Empowerment, compatibility and partnership

Expectations regarding the future husband expressed in the profiles are very
carefully delineated in the profiles, suggesting that participants have clearly
formulated their perceptions of gender roles and responsibilities in an Islamic
marriage. Compatibility was an important concept in all profiles, although
the ways in which it was defined varied. Positive traits such as gentleness,
respectfulness, independence, maturity, intelligence, good manners and
education were listed not because women needed a leader or a 'rock'. Rather,
they reflected women's own self-perceptions and a conviction that they need
a spouse like themselves to make the relationship work. One participant
referred to the *hadith* idea of creation of the woman from a man's rib to signal
to her potential suitors that she believes in equality in marriage and she
expects her future relationship to be built on this principle:

> Women are made from the mans rib,they are not above you,or
> below you,they are right beside you. (Jameelah99, UK)

A hope that the 'ideal man' would be a best friend, a companion,
suggests that women expect partnership relations:

> I am looking for a life partner aged preferably 38-50 but age is just a number if two souls are compatible. Someone who sees me as their equal, their twin flame. A man who will be my best friend. (Razia, UK)

> I am looking for someone easy-going to compliment my nature. That said I do not want to set strict conditions; I realise that there is no sure-fire criteria in determining who is 'the one'. (Sassy, UK)

> Someone older than me, I don't mind a beard, a companion, someone who will bring out the best in me, a positive soul, someone who prays, knowledgeable in Islam to help me too, mature and down to earth, similar in nature to myself. (StarryEyes, UK)

Men are expected to be compatible with women in that they also grow personally and Islamically. Marriage is not seen as a state to passively remain in, but a perfect opportunity to develop together and support and encourage mutual progress. Such a dynamic understanding of a relationship is shared by many women:

> Someone to laugh with, cry with, be amazed at life's miracles with and grow with. (StarryEyes, UK)

Participants are very clear that they subscribe to online matchmaking websites to find a legitimate spouse, a husband, not a boyfriend or a friend. Extra-marital relationships are not allowed in Islam; in addition, unmarried women maintaining free sexual contacts face social stigma and a label of impious promiscuity (Imtoual and Hussein 2009:27-8). It is thus especially important that women using the Internet, a non-traditional mode of finding a spouse whereby they are not socially controlled, construct their identity as sexually unavailable unless married. Unlike participants in Galal's study of Egyptian online dating (2003), where some young people went online as an alternative to face-to-face dating that might be impossible due to religious beliefs, here many

profiles include a disclaimer meant to discourage individuals seeking just dating and not intending to marry:

> I am only interested in getting to know brothers insh'Allah who are serious about marriage. (MissLovely, Seychelles)

> On a final note, married or involved men, and players, please don't respond and waste my time, you know I'm far too good for you :o) (Sayeeda, UK)

> I don't want to be bothered with brothers of islam looking for girlfriend or a relationship,, I am here only for marriage Inshaa allah, (Jameela99, UK)

> No guys with issues or hangups that prevent them from marriage (LL70, UK)

They also cut short men's attempts to befriend them through online communicators:

> Once again, i don't need a homie, or a mate or a buddy who is actually bored and is desperate for friends do not waste your time on that you have been WARNED! (Deen789, United States)

The participants are extremely wary of foreign individuals who may want to enter a marriage in order to use their spouse's citizenship status as a springboard to obtaining a visa in the United Kingdom or the United States. The set-up of an arranged or a forced marriage to a husband in the native country of the parents is challenged and reversed; not only do the women not consider relocating to another country; they do not want to be married just for their citizenship either.

> *Please only contact me if you are a British Citizen and you are from London. I'm not interested in helping one out with their Visa applications to stay in this country!* Razia, UK)

UK/USA citizen only please!! as I dont want to waste my time. (Alia, US)

Btw i am in no situation to provide visa for anyone as i am a single mother who is underpaid. So if u are looking to find a better life in Singapore by marrying me, then pls drop the idea. (Sameera, Singapore)

Women are also keen to point out that they are neither in desperate need for a husband or friends; almost all profiles contain references to socializing, friends, and families. They indicate they already operate within strong networks. They come across as feeling fulfilled and empowered; a husband is sought so that he can complement, not complete them as individual human beings:

Im quite sharp too so please dont try to pull a fast one on me by assuming Im too old, need a younger guy or struggle to even find one :-) (LL70, UK)

I don't see myself with a "divorced complex"! I am content with myself and my life as it is. (Sayeeda, UK)

Finally, a frequent disclaimer concerned men's photographs. Participants tended to disapprove of men trying to contact them but without photographs on their profiles. The women argued that since they have provided photographs of themselves, they should have a similar chance of judging potential suitors' looks. They did not wish to be contacted by men who were unfit or short. Whilst physical attractiveness was not regarded as the most important quality, physical attraction was listed as significant by fifteen participants.

Pushing the traditional boundaries of femininity through leisure practices

Traditionally constructed femininity, framed by concepts of obedience, gentleness, caring responsibilities and home-based hobbies is not common

amongst women who independently seek spouses on the Internet. The participants talk at length about their education, occupation, and unusual/acquired interests, creating an image of financially and socially independent women looking for similar spouses. At the same time, they display a great amount of distance to themselves and their achievements, possibly in order not to come across as conceited or dull to potential suitors.

> I used to be a nerd. I now have it in writing and have gone to be a fully fledged -even bigger nerd in a big nerdy job! :D (Zahra, UK)

> I am a 25 year old Informatics manager currently working in the NHS. I have a stable job but then again, is a job in the NHS stable...hehe. I was actually thinking of starting a business any ideas anyone??? (Razia, UK)

> I am an Investment Banker by day and a musician by night... and on the side I also am a charity event organiser which I love doing. (Jasmine, UK)

One participant talked about her interest in fine art as complementing her successful career. The mention of artists' names and trends in art may constitute a specific code, used to ensure that a future spouse will share her acquired tastes, recognise her as an art connoisseur, and thus prove more compatible with her long-term. An emphasis on such rather elite interests, coupled with a disclosure of her prestigious occupation may also serve as indicators of her social class and the preferred social class of her future spouse:

> I'm a City lawyer, working in London. When not in the confines of the office I can be found wandering around art galleries trying to appreciate surrealist Dali but finding myself drifting back to my first love, French Impressionist painters. (Sayeeda, UK)

Many participants emphasized that they were physically fit and active through activities such as hiking, jogging and weight lifting at the gym.

Nine women mentioned that they regretted not having had an opportunity to travel, which they would now like to do with their husbands. Interests and hobbies described by the participants rarely fell into stereotypically feminine categories. Women confessed to fascination with cars and football:

> I'm a total motor head when it comes to cars as i love prestige & performance cars also I love my sport Football, F1, Boxing and Cricket. (Asma, UK)

> well I love football, cars and shopping. What more can a girl want. A fast car to drive around, a car to carry all the shopping and come home to a match of Manchester utd on the telly. Bliss! (Sameera, UK)

Some of them embraced extreme sports:

> [I am] a bit of a tomboy too, like quad biking, not travelled for a while, I can swim and snorkel, fancy a crack at paintballing too. (LL70, UK)

> I have also recently taken up flying lessons which have been great fun. (Jasmine, UK)

This strong emphasis on traditionally masculine attributes (strength, stamina, courage) was evident also in Jagger's study (1998) on dating advertisements where she concluded that both men and women preferred to represent themselves as escaping traditional gender binaries. Whilst Jagger problematized such preferences in the context of a postmodern, consumer society, it is likely that women in this study would be more interested in framing their 'untraditionally feminine' lifestyle choices with the help of Islamic history and interpretations. Islam does encourage women to participate in sports, as it is documented that the Prophet Muhammad encouraged Aisha to run and the Qur'an orders Muslims to 'keep strong' (Walseth and Fasting 2003:52-54). It is also reported that Aisha, a role model for many contemporary Muslim women, fought

on the back of a camel in the Battle of the Camel in AD 656 (Phillips, 2003:33).

In the profiles, long accounts of sport-related interests tend to be balanced out with some references to more traditionally feminine pastimes, usually shopping. Only one participant listed cooking and housework as pastimes reflecting her 'feminine side'. It seems that shopping is mentioned deliberately as an activity that connects the participants to their feminine 'roots', as opposed to other activities – which are enjoyed because they are inherently enjoyable:

> I have a strong passion for a successful career; however , staying true to my female roots, I like shopping. (Jasmine, UK)

> Currently i spend most of my time at work and gym....a bit less time out shopping but don't be fooled i'm still a woman! (Asma, UK)

At the same time, one of the participants claims that she is 'not a fan of shopping for clothes, or designer stuff for hours on end, tedious to say the least', instead stating that she prefers to read 'NatGeo, New Scientist, current issues, History, Archaeology, and [is] becoming quite well read Islamically' and does not mind rats, worms, snakes, frogs and snails. In one breath she refuses to be seen as squeamish, focused on fashion, uninterested in science and politics, and, most importantly, religiously uneducated.

Fun was a concept strongly cutting across the dataset. Over half of the women described themselves as fun-lovers; they claimed to enjoy their lives, however, always within the limits of Islam – the *halal* way. Therefore, activities such as drinking, gambling and illicit sexual contacts, considered as fun by many non-Muslims, are not permitted. For example, Zahra remarked:

> Eating out! - cos lets face it , if you're a Muslim, I don't think there's much else to do - i mean we're hardly going to all go

out and hit the pub are we? So I luuurve eating out, that's generally THE activity that can bring all my family together for a bit of fam-o time - successfully! (Zahra, UK)

Islam is rarely linked to 'fun' in the literature, however, as these participants observe, fun can be *halal*, which has been confirmed by a positive fatwa regarding the comedy show *Allah Made Me Funny* issued by the Grand Ayatollah Sistani of Iraq (Van Nieuwkerk 2008:173). There are even Muslim female stand-up comedians, such as Shazia Mirza in the U.K. Leisure spaces seen as safe by South Asian women, discussed by Green and Singleton (2006) centre upon the community and family, and this is partly confirmed by this study. However, participants' narratives do not reflect the isolation and exclusion from public leisure spaces observed among Britsh Asian women by Parmar (1995).

Conclusions

This brief glimpse into Muslim women's online matchmaking profiles offers some insights into their priorities in life generally and in relation to the institution of marriage. Contrary to Adesina and Ayodele's argument (2004) that online matchmaking undermines marriage as an institution, this study has found that technology itself can hardly dictate priorities related to lifestyle choices; rather it facilitates choices grounded in religions or personal philosophies. Whilst the discussed websites constitute an alternative to traditional, family-facilitated matchmaking, they promote the idea of a *halal* Islamic marriage through enabling Muslims to find potential spouses independently.

There is not much sociological literature on Muslim marriages, or expectations related to marriage amongst Muslims in Europe and US. Due to a preoccupation with certain topics (mostly dress code and terrorism) many areas of 'ordinary' Muslim lives remain unstudied. This article gives a snapshot of the variety of ways of balancing and juxtaposing religious beliefs, personal-political positions, evolving gender relationships, lifestyles, and aspirations amongst Muslim women in the West.

Religion does not come across as a static concept constricted by a set number of rules. Women on these match-making sites often emphasize the significance of religion in their lives, their consciousness of their shortcomings as Muslims, and their willingness to develop themselves intellectually and spiritually as Muslims. A husband is seen as a partner and supporter in this learning process, not as a leader or head of family. Aside from setting the bar high in relation to religion, the women have carefully spelled out expectations regarding the character and the looks of the ideal spouse. They also express their reservations regarding his undesirable qualities, thus displaying well-defined visions of their future relationships. Such visions are usually built on concepts of compatibility, equality, partnership, friendship and physical attraction. Through independent spouse searching they are able to set these criteria and make the selection. They are, for example, able to judge whether a candidate is a 'good Muslim', i.e. whether his level of religiosity is appropriate. Thus, as far as their personal lives are concerned, they are able to exercise religious authority which comes with responsibility regarding religious and other choices.

This authority also allows them to set personal boundaries of *halal* behaviour; all participants in this study either pursue higher education or professional careers in areas such as nursing, management, science, accounting and finance. Some of them were never married, possibly due to work-related commitments. One of the participants said: "I admit that I have approached the topic of marriage with much patience whilst working hard to build my career". Others were divorced and their accounts of previous marriages suggested that they were the ones who initiated the divorce proceedings. As Islam gives the woman the right to divorce her husband, they did not act contrary to Islamic teaching.

Reynolds and Wetherell (2004) describe singleness as a 'troubled category' for women, as they state it is difficult to convincingly construct singleness in a positive way and subsequently choose to leave the category by entering a relationship; on the other hand, by idealizing marriage, women run the risk of being categorized as desperate and somehow

deficient spinsters. Imtoual and Hussein (2009) report that many single Muslim women find it difficult to construct singleness positively, in contrast to secular women in Reynolds and Wetherell's study, as they are unable to legitimately release their sexual desires outside of marriage. Faced with a lack of appropriate marriage partners in their immediate networks, they have to enact the 'myth of the happy celibate', a belief that it is possible to suppress female sexual desires whilst outside of marriage. This is not least because second- and third-generation Muslim girls are considered by many Muslim parents as inappropriately Westernised and therefore unsuitable to be their sons' wives (Imtoual and Hussein, 2009:28); in addition, these very girls often consider 'imported' partners as incompatible in terms of education and understanding of gender roles (2009:28). This reluctance to marry candidates from overseas is also evidenced by profiles in this study. Women do not wish to be 'visa providers', but also prefer partners with comparable levels of education and similar lifestyle choices. The willingness of many participants to find a husband (and, as it is indicated by high proportion of self-instigated divorces among them, to separate from one) suggests that the Islamic construction of marriage as a religious choice, and the ability to select a candidate through online matchmaking may render moving in and out of the singleness category less troubled for the Muslim women in this study as compared to women in Reynolds and Wetherell's (2004) research. As one of the women writes: 'Im not desperate by a looooooog shot, just trying to find someone Islamically suitable, for ME!' She clearly signals that she does not represent the 'desperate spinster' category, but portrays herself as a satisfied single woman who would consider moving out of the 'single category' only for a 'Islamically suitable' partner.

Engaging in activities traditionally perceived as the domain of men (paintball shooting, flying planes, repairing cars), they actively push the boundaries of femininity. Unlike Green and Singleton's British Asian female participants, they do not confine their movements to the sphere of the home and actively take advantage of opportunities the public sphere has to offer. At the same time, they do not construct their self-representation as entirely 'tomboyish career women' – they mention activities associated

with femininity, such as shopping, crafts, or watching the X-factor that somewhat balance out the other impression.

These women are willing be understood on the basis of neither gender nor religious stereotypes and extremes. They occupy what Khan (2000), drawing from Bhabha (1994), called the Muslim 'third space' - a space in between, *in between* Islamism and Orientalism, traditional and secular values, Muslim and non-Muslim environments. One participant said she was a 'proud British Muslim, a modern girl with a traditional twist', thus exemplifying these juxtapositions of seemingly distant concepts.

Further research exploration of Muslim women's 'non-orthodox' interests and experiences would contribute to a more complex understanding of their lives, at the moment represented in research mostly through the concept of *hijab*, and the grim phenomena of forced marriages and honor killings.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

[1] This study is addressed in this paper due to the fact that Nigeria has the second largest Muslim population in Africa (78 million), being a multi-faith state with Muslims and Christians almost equaling in numbers.

[2] Similarly, the act of marriage may be facilitated by Internet services such as video chat and still remain within the bounds of Islamic permissibility. Such 'online' marriage is treated as 'marriage by proxy' as long as all the necessary documentation is signed by the interested parties (Beyer and Hussin 2010).

[3] In order to protect the identity of the participants I do not use their pseudonyms or the real names of the websites.

[4] Revert is a common term used to refer to converts to Islam, as it is widely believed that adopting Islam is in fact *returning* to the original religion, as opposed to merely *switching* to a different religion.

[5] The ritual prayer expected to be performed five times a day.

[6] This opens up the extensive debate on 'true Islam', and of course, except the fact that all Muslims acknowledge the Qur'an as the main source of Islam, there is no agreement on the validity of other sources and interpretations. For an informed discussion of the role of culture in Islamic thought by a prominent Muslim intellectual, see Ramadan (2009:183-206).

[7] Reynolds and Wetherell (2003:7) describe interpretative repertoires as 'recognizable routines of arguments, descriptions and evaluations found in people's talk often distinguished by familiar clichés, anecdotes and tropes'.

Anna Piela

New Media and Social-political Change in Iran

Mohammad Hadi Sohrabi-Haghighat

Corresponding author: M. Sohrabi-Haghighat, Swinburne University, Hawthorn, Victoria 3122, Australia. E-mail: msohrabihaghighat@swin.edu.au

Abstract:

The increasing penetration of new communication technologies into everyday life has attracted a growing interest in the social, economic and political implications of these technologies. Most studies have looked at Western democratic societies and the literature on the developing countries is unfortunately small in comparison. In 2009 Iran witnessed a political upheaval in the aftermath of the presidential election in which the Internet was utilized effectively by the political opposition. News and videos of police brutality and repression were uploaded online, including onto social networking sites, in what was called the 'Twitter Revolution'. Expectations rose on the capacity of new media to bring about democratic change in Iran. Later developments, however, showed that 'mouse clicks' alone do not produce profound political changes. In this article we look at the role of the new media and the social and political functions it took on in the post election period. We suggest that, firstly, new media has helped ordinary citizens and the political opposition challenge the government's monopoly of information. Secondly, we suggest that new media have paved the way for the emergence of a global public sphere for Iranians across the globe. This article also looks at the social and cultural impacts of the satellite channels which have been an ongoing source of concern for the Iranian conservative regime. Finally we take a critical stance and analyze the effects of new communication technologies in light of the 'digital divide' and 'the radicalization of the Green Movement'.

Communication technologies and social change

The media and information technologies play an indispensable role in the conception of modern societies (see for example Bell 1973; Baudrillard 1983; Castells 2000). The Internet like other technologies is socially shaped (McKenzie and Wajcman 1999). With the advent of the Internet in the

1990s a number of utopian discourses emerged extolling the Internet as a miraculous solution for major social problems (Fisher and Wright 2001). More recent research has shown that the Internet is incorporated into people's everyday life and blends with the preexisting social context (Wellman and Haythornthwaite 2002; Wellman 2004). While the Internet is arguably a source of free flowing information in Western countries, it can become a tool in the hands of authoritarian regimes for economic and not democratic purposes, like what can be seen in China (Goldsmith and Wu 2006). This reveals the decisiveness of the existing political and social contexts the Internet enters into.

This article aims to investigate the role of new communication technologies in generating socio-political changes in Iranian society. For the most part the existing research has focused on Western societies' experience of the Internet (see for example Keck and Sikkink 1998; Pickerill 2006; Terranova 2001). We believe that the study of new media within the context of a Middle Eastern country like Iran, with its social and political particularities, can shed light on some uncovered aspects of these technologies.

The 2009 presidential election attracted global attention and gave rise to hopes for progressive change in Iran. However, the events that followed cast doubt on the realization of these hopes (Esfandiari 2010). In this article we focus on the social and political functions of the Internet and satellite channels in the post election period. We begin our discussion by looking at the history of the Internet and satellite channels in Iran.

New media and its politics in Iran

The Internet was introduced in Iran in 1993 and has experienced exponential growth since then. From 2001 to 2009 Internet usage increased annually by 48 percent (*OpenNet Initiative* 2009). Recent statistics indicate there are more than 33 million Internet users in Iran amounting to 43.2 percent of the population (*Internet world stats* 2010). Domestic sources report the figure at around one third of the population (CINA 2009). The government has implemented national plans to develop the infrastructure and has also

carried out educational programs in schools and governmental organizations to improve Internet literacy. The increased number of university students and graduates has drastically facilitated the integration of the Internet into everyday life.

The use of the Internet for social purposes is commonplace; social networking sites like Twitter, Facebook, blogs, YouTube, Flicker, and Wikipedia are widely used (CIMA 2009). Blogs are particularly popular indicated by the fact that Iran has one of the highest rates of blogging in the world. Reports indicate that there are about 700,000 Iranian bloggers (Sreberny and Khiabany 2010) and that 60,000 blogs are updated routinely in Iran (Kelly and Etling 2008). The website Alexa.com tracks websites by number of hits and shows that after Google and Yahoo, the blog provider sites Blogfa and MihanBlog are the most visited websites in Iran (Alexa 2010). Social networking sites like Facebook and Balatarin (a popular web 2.0 website in Persian which helps users to find the most popular web pages through a credit system) and news websites like Gooya News and Rooz are blocked but are still widely visited in Iran (Shirazi 2010).

Satellite channels are another part of the new media in Iran. Tens of Farsi satellite channels are accessed from inside Iran and most of them are stationed outside the country particularly in the US. Their programs include music, movies, commercials and political commentary. *Voice of America* (*VOA*) and *BBC Persian* are popular for their political programs and *Farsi1* for its entertaining movies and serials. Apart from a small number of channels run by the Iranian government like *Press TV* and *Jame Jam*, nearly all satellite channels are anti-regime. The precise number of people watching satellite television is not known. Some sources estimate it to be half the population (Wordpress 2008) while others estimate the number at around 40 percent (Iran Focus 2010).

The government fluctuates between pragmatic and ideological policy with regards to the media (Khiabany 2007). While the government invested vast sums in web communications technology, it has simultaneously attempted to minimize its socio-political effects. One recent survey indicates that

Iran is one of the leading Internet filterers in the world (*OpenNet Initiative* 2009). Opposition websites are systematically blocked and internet cafes are under constant scrutiny (*Radio Liberty* 2007; *Wired* 2001). Cyber activists producing anti-regime content have been targeted and even sentenced to death (*Reporters without Borders* 2010; Tehrani 2010).

The government views the satellite channels as a corrupting amoral force against Iranian Islamic society. To neutralize the perceived threat, the government continues to sending jamming signals to the satellites and this has received strong international condemnation (*Deutsche Welle* 2010). The government sporadically collects satellite dishes off roof tops but these campaigns have been unsuccessful in halting the rate of residential satellite installations (Perry 2008; Sanati 2006).

The 2009 Presidential election: a turning point

The regime had viewed the new media as a threat and taken direct action to curb its influence for a period before the upheavals of the 2009 presidential election. However, the election gave new meaning to communication technologies and is now perceived as a threat to the very foundations of the regime. Ironically, the development of telecommunication infrastructure opened new doors for dissidents. The unprecedented political resurgence in the wake of the election and the dramatic role of new media boosted hopes for a democratic change.

The shocking announcement of a landslide victory for the incumbent president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was followed by mass rallies in the big cities, particularly in Tehran. Protesters believed that large-scale fraud had occurred and that the election should be declared null and void (Simpson 2009). The regime responded with a repressive crackdown. Foreign media reporters were forced to leave the country and opposition newspapers and websites were shut down. Many opposition leaders were arrested overnight and tortured and street protesters were violently attacked. Many people were killed and thousands were arrested and jailed. Yet the regime was unable to maintain a façade of control.

Protesters used their mobile phones to take photos and videos of police brutality and published them online. Large numbers of YouTube videos came out day by day showing events unfolding on the streets (Nasr 2009). The links were shared on Facebook and the Internet soon became the first source for up-to-the minute news. Satellite channels like *BBC Persian* and *VOA* played a large part in collating the photos and videos into a news story. These images successfully caught the attention of the global media. Human rights groups around the world condemned the violence and many states made statements requesting Ahmadinejad respect the Iranian people's right to peaceful protest (Burns and Eltham 2009; Hermida 2010; Shirky 2010; Nasr 2009).

The Internet in the election aftermath well revealed its potential as a powerful political force (Sohrabi-Haghighat and Mansouri 2010). Hopes were high to the extent that commentators were calling the uprising a *Twitter Revolution* (*The Washington Times* 2009) and *Facebook Revolution* (Foster 2009). The protests continued on for several months but the regime eventually regained control of the political sphere. This cast doubts on the utopian views aired during the early days of the protests (Schectman 2009; Abadi 2010; Weaver 2010). While the protests did not come to a 'revolution', the political scene fundamentally changed. The anger at the election outcome is still palpable and the government has extended its reach over the Internet more than ever before. Harsher legislation has been enacted against cyber activists and more invasive internet surveillance tools are used to curb the flow of information.

The next section further examines the capacity of the Internet and satellite television to generate social and political change within the more repressive climate that is the post-election period.

The emergence of a global public sphere

New media has helped bridge the deep gap that existed between activists inside and outside Iran. Social networking sites like Facebook, Balatarin

and Twitter are bringing Iranians together across the globe. Websites established and managed from outside Iran are visited mostly by Iranians inside Iran implying that Iranians use proxies successfully to bypass filters (Shirazi 2010). Satellite channels which are mainly based in the US and Europe have millions of viewers in Iran. Despite all the measures taken by the government, Iranians around the world can come together online for the latest news coverage as well as to exchange ideas. To better understand this trend we next examine the social placement and political identity of the Iranian diaspora.

The Iranian diaspora

Before the 1979 revolution the number of Iranians abroad was only in the tens of thousands (Ghorashi and Boersma 2009). The 1979 revolution and its repercussions (Iran-Iraq war, repression and persecution of dissidents) resulted in large-scale emigration and refugee seeking (McAuliffe 2007). The number of Iranians living abroad is estimated to be between half a million to 2 million people by some academic sources and 4 million by Christina Monitor (*Radio Farda* 2010). The nostalgic memories of Iran as a 'lost home' have been prevalent amongst at least the first generation of emigrants (Ghorashi and Boersma 2009) and this has been a common theme in pop music and literature produced in the diaspora since 1979. Throughout this period the Iranian regime's aggressive foreign policies resulted in Iran's increasing isolation from the rest of the world. Added to this was an atmosphere of mistrust between political reformists in Iran and activists living abroad.

With the victory of Ahmadinejad in the 2005 presidential election the political sphere became even more repressive and the opposition found it harder to survive. The disputed 2009 presidential election was a turning point and the ensuing mass protests changed the scene fundamentally. The regime clearly signaled that the opposition will no longer be tolerated. Even small gatherings of dissidents ran the risk of arrest. Traditionally the most outspoken group in Iran, university student activists were silenced and detained in large numbers. In brief, no political activity against the

regime was to be permitted. Even mention of the opposition leaders' names in newspapers was banned (Kamali Dehghan 2010). With the clamp down on traditional media channels, the Internet played a vital role in keeping dissidents and activists in contact and in circulating news and information.

The Iranian diaspora played a large part in spreading news to the world stage. Iranians across the globe successfully organized rallies and demonstrations in support for the political opposition, the so called Green Movement. After decades of isolation, the Iranian diaspora found themselves able to have a say in Iran's domestic politics and exert pressure on the Islamic regime. The politically diverse fabric of the Green Movement allowed Iranians abroad to share in the movement's collective identity. The overarching theme of this collectivity was opposition to the authoritarian policies of the regime. UK based *BBC Persian* and US based *VOA* aired roundtable discussions on current issues which were hugely successful with the viewer audience at home. It was their success that inspired *Euro News* to launch its Persian service (Briel 2010). These channels of communication and information have undermined the regime's ability to keep the public sphere under the influence of its propaganda machinery.

Challenging the monopoly of information

Despite all efforts made to stifle the opposition, the Green Movement has survived due in large part to new media. Street protests have moved to mediated spaces and the regime has been unable to colonize the online public sphere (*VOA News* 2010). After the election, the Revolutionary Guard (the major section of the army) bought a 51 percent stake in the national Telecommunication Company to extend its control over cyberspace (Tait 2009). The police also launched a new unit called the 'internet police' to monitor the online activities (Aljazeera 2009; CNN Tech 2010). The reach of opposition websites is unclear, however their significance can be gauged by the government's response and sensitivity (Nouri 2010).

Regime's sensitivity to the new media manifests a profound fear among the ruling group. Regardless of the capacity of these technologies, the

government's *perception* of the capacity would have actual effects because situations when defined real they become real in their consequences (Thomas 1923). Responding to the opposition on the Internet, denying their claims and warning online activists of severe consequences has become part of the routine of official news. Indeed, people have realized that two narratives of political events exist; one of the state-owned television and government news agencies and the other online and on satellite television. One portrays Iran as a world-power, the other warns of the coming economic hardships and growing isolation of Iran in the world.

The pervasive censorship in the official media has turned people into news producers, a phenomenon referred to as 'citizen journalism' (Goode 2009). Ordinary citizens take photos and videos of events not covered by the official media and publish them on YouTube. In a recent case, a video was published on the Internet showing a man who had stabbed another man (who he thought had had an affair with his wife) and who was not allowing anyone to approach and help the victim. Two police officers were present at the scene but did not take action for 45 minutes, leading to the victim's death. This video sparked an outcry on social networking sites where the police and bystanders of the scene were harshly criticized. Parliament held a meeting to investigate the event (Mehrnews 2010) and the police, who do not usually respond to the public, were forced to accept the dereliction of duty by the police officers. This incident (*Iranian* 2010; *Rajanews* 2010) illustrates how new media functions as a surveillance tool for grass roots allowing them to bypass the traditional gatekeepers and project their voices.

Satellite channels and their socio-cultural impact

Conservative views supported by the government view satellite channel as a corrupting force undermining religious beliefs, promoting promiscuity and breaking families apart (Saberi 2010). Besides channels like *BBC Persian* and *VOA*, which are a concern for the political ideas they promote, there are also the entertainment channels. Channels like *MBC Farsi* and

more recently *Farsi1*, broadcast movies and serials dubbed in Farsi or with Farsi subtitles. *Farsi1* has attracted millions of viewers in just one year and the number is rapidly growing.

Farsi1 was established by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation and an Afghani family. It broadcasts comedies and dramas from Korea, Colombia and the US, but are 'toned down for a more conservative Iranian audience' (Filkins 2010). The channel's soap operas with their low quality dubbing have drawn viewers from the state television which has concerned government leaders (Erdbrink 2010; Sinaiee 2010; Aslan 2010). A website affiliated to the Revolutionary Guards, analyses *Farsi1* in a report and concludes:

> After unsuccessful military attacks, economic sanctions, and creating political tensions, now a more complex and softer attack to the Islamic revolution targets the Islamic family. It views the disintegration of the Iranian family as a prerequisite of the disintegration of a united Iranian society (Fars News 2010).

These views demonstrate the profound unhappiness of the state with the socio-cultural impacts of entertainment satellite channels like *Farsi1*.

Discussion

Thus far we have looked at new media and its capacity to produce social and political change in Iran. It should be noted that we do not believe in technological determinism, but choose to analyze technology within social, economic and political contexts. In this section we provide a critique through the lenses of the digital divide and its role in the radicalization of the Green Movement.

Digital divide

As previously stated, it is estimated that more than half the population do not have access to the Internet or satellite television. This might be

due to issues of financial affordability, moral panic or lack of knowledge or skill. Installing a satellite dish costs about 100 to 120 dollars. The average price for ADSL with a speed of 128 kilobytes per second is about 20 dollars per month (*Iran Iran* 2010) while at an Internet cafe it costs about $0.5 per hour in Tehran. Out of the group that does have internet access, only 250,000 users have access to high speed Internet (*OpenNet Initiative* 2009).

It seems that there is a correlation between having access to new media and support for the regime. When moving from cities to the villages and from the upper classes to the lower classes, the amount of support for the regime increases. The relationship between the social position on the one hand and support for the Green Movement and the regime on the other is a source of debate (Behdad 2010; WSWS 2010; Maljoo 2010). However, it is safe to suggest that the Green Movement is supported mostly by the middle and upper classes. An Iranian sociologist, Ghazian, in his analysis of the Green Movement argues that the movement has been unable to produce slogans and programs to attract the interest of low-income groups in urban areas. Apart from the vertical expansion through social classes, Ghazian maintains that the movement could not extend its horizontal and geographic reach beyond big cities (Ghazian 2010). Opposition leaders accept this argument with the Green Movement's leader, Mir Houssein Mousavi, stressing the necessity of extending the movement to 'school teachers and workers' (*Aftab News* 2010). In his letter to students on Student International Day he asked them to extend the 'knowledge to those who don't have access to the virtual world' (Mousavi 2010).

We do not suggest that merely providing people with the technology will simply alter their attitudes. Our point is that the lower socio-economic groups do not have access to alternative sources of information and are bombarded with one-sided and biased information from the official media, mainly state-owned television. Within this context access to other news sources *could* influence the political views of these groups.

The radicalization of the Green Movement

After three decades, the Iranian diaspora can influence domestic politics with the help of new media. With this newfound voice, the tensions between the expectations of activists inside Iran and abroad have emerged. Iranian activists abroad push for radical and fundamental changes however unrealistic they may be. Some reformist leaders are concerned that Iranian activists abroad are creating false hopes in light of the actual political opportunities available. Taking into account the loose leadership structure of the Green Movement, this is a real concern. Politics is about choosing suitable means to reach *attainable* ends. A veteran political reformist and an opposition leader, Ezatollah Sahabi (2009), sent an open letter to 'Iranians abroad' asking them not to encourage farfetched goals. He wrote:

> Compatriots who live outside Iran are more susceptible, due to the nature of living abroad, to leading people to become 'subjective' about domestic circumstances. Moreover, many compatriots who love their land and would like to come back might become impatient and 'hasty'... leading to expediting processes, emotional and irrational encounters, and rising levels of expectations...

A well known political analyst, Abbas Abdi (2010), who was Mehdi Karroubi's advisor in the 2009 presidential election (Karroubi together with Mousavi were reformist candidates in the election), highlights the transcendence of geographic borders and its negative implications for the movement:

> A more critical problem which happened to the movement but was not noticed well was the communication revolution which has transcended the borders of Iran. The problem is that people who live in Iran think and speak within the restrictions of their real [social and political] conditions but people outside do not have these limitations. Thus we witness a big gap between the actual conditions in Iran and the slogans and

ideas aired. This gap did not exist 30-40 years ago, even ten years ago ... this gap goes a bit forward then [the movement] encounters impasse.

These views exemplify the divergence of aims and strategies taken by people inside and outside the country. Thus, Iranians living across the globe bring their differing political and social circumstances to the online public sphere which can lead to political deadlock within the opposition.

Conclusion

In this article we investigated the functions of new media within the context of Iranian society. We discussed the ways the internet and satellite channels challenge the regime's monopoly on information. The Internet became an effective way for dissidents to mobilize, coordinate, and organize street protests in the aftermath of the 2009 presidential election. In this way, new *political opportunities* for activists were realized through new media (Sohrabi-Haghighah and Mansouri 2010). New media assisted the Green Movement to transcend geographical boundaries and has prepared the way for the emergence of an independent global public sphere for Iranians. New media is undermining the regime's propaganda machine and its capacity to suppress dissenting voices thereby shaking the foundations of a highly ideological political system. Government attempts to control internet content, while it has had some impact, has been unsuccessful in dismantling this emerging public sphere.

We also looked into the limitations of the new media in bringing about profound political changes. We suggested that Iranians living abroad after three decades have found leverage in domestic politics through new media. There is the potential that the movement will be radicalized by the high political expectations of the Iranian diaspora which do not take into account the realities of deeply rooted social and political institutional obstacles. Divergence amongst activists inside and outside Iran is likely to create new hurdles for the movement's future direction. This is an important point considering the loose leadership structure and grassroots

internet powerbase of the movement. Moreover, caution should be taken in piecing together an image of Iran's political circumstances only through the online sphere and satellite channels. The digital divide limits who takes part in the dialogue in this emerging public sphere. This manifests its importance in that the digital divides correlates with support for and against the regime, exposing the limitations of new media in generating socio-political change. While the voices of the urban middle class are loud and clear, there is underrepresentation of the politics of the lower socio-economic groups and people who live in small towns and villages.

This article aimed to contribute to the debate on the capabilities and limitations of new media in generating socio-political change. Having passed the stage of utopian discourses on new communication technologies, we now witness the surfacing of more critical approaches to the study of new media. These approaches stress the significance of preexisting social and political conditions in shaping the way technology is developed and used.

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e-Islam: the Spanish Public Virtual Sphere

Arturo Guerrero Enterría

Abstract:

The increasing presence of Islamic content in cyberspace has made it possible for an ever-expanding Muslim public space to be established. This process is connected to the phenomenon of globalisation, which in turn has generated a process of growing glocalisation, wherein content in cyberspace has not only been globalised – making it accessible from any Internet platform around the world – but opening a channel for the expression of local issues. In Spain, institutionalised Islam has found new routes for communication, information and visibilisation with these new technologies. However, as this paper will show, its strategy is based on traditional mass media models of communication, namely the one-way and one-to-many communication models. This leaves room for other types of actors to use strategies based on different communication models: two-way and many-to-many, taking better advantage of the potential in new information and communication technologies to more easily find a niche in Spanish Muslim cyberspace.

1. Introduction

Hundreds of thousands of individuals start their day using new information and communication technologies to search for information or services in cyberspace[1], where content of all types intermingles via numerous forms of expression[2]. This content has revealed a growing presence of Islam and Muslims expressing their identity, their sense of belonging and their way of understanding Islam through their participation in cyberspace. In the academic world, research and studies in this field are still not very well developed, which is mainly due to two obstacles that have made this task more complicated:

• the rapid expansion and evolution of new information and communication technologies and the appearance of new applications to complement them; and

• the lack of any methodology adapted to these new interactive resources.

Despite this, several authors have approached this topic from different points of view. Dale Eickelman and Jon Anderson (2003), Olivier Roy (2003) and Gary Bunt (2000, 2003, 2009) are among the scholars who have pondered this topic. However, research discussing the Spanish sphere is practically non-existent, despite the growing presence of Islamic content in Spanish in cyberspace.

1.1. Globalisation and new information and communication technologies

The increasing presence of Islamic content in Spanish related to new information and communication technologies falls within the context of globalisation. Indeed, in the first stages of the development of computer communication, the presence of religious content was observed (Campbell 2006). In this respect, globalisation has made it possible for a growing number of users to gain access to any content, regardless of time and space. However, there are many exceptions to this, since several obstacles exist that limit global access to cyberspace, such as the double digital divide and the censorship of new information and communication technologies.

The double digital divide refers to the gap between people with unequal access to new information and communication technologies (Scholz et al. 2008:457-509). This double divide is due to the fact that part of the population does not have access to these new technologies as a result of two main factors. The first factor is related to the geographic area from which the user wishes to gain access to cyberspace; at this time, there is unequal access to the new technologies across large geographic areas. Importantly, this inequality is in relation to the different economic, political and social development of different areas in the world. The second factor is based

on individual social issues. This phenomenon is not associated with a person's geographic situation, since it occurs in all parts of the world. This second digital divide is related to personal characteristics such as age, sex, qualifications and economic conditions.

Censorship results in part from the elements that affect the first factor of the digital divide relating to the social and political characteristics of states; it is not a consequence of their development as states per se, but rather of the desire on the part of state authorities to control the media to which their citizens have access. Controlling the Internet as a means of communication is more complicated than controlling the mass media. The mass media is usually under state control, since it requires considerable financial and technological investment, which is not as significant in the case of the Internet. Although state authorities are less able to censor the Internet, different countries including China and Saudi Arabia do have mechanisms for censoring and blocking cyberspace content[3].

For some researchers, the greater laxity in controlling media content resulting from the appearance of new information and communication technologies has brought about the appearance of a new public sphere in the Muslim world. New ideas are circulating in this new space that are potentially anti-establishment vis-à-vis the central message that has predominated up to now (Eickelman and Anderson 2003). This could entail the appearance of a path "...to the renegotiation and redefinition – if not (re-)invention of religious authority..." (Scholz et al. 2008:465).

1.2. The Islamic virtual public sphere

Beginning as early as the appearance of Web 1.0[4], Islamic content was being produced by users with greater ability to exploit cyberspace, and consumed by users with a growing ability to navigate this space. However, the turning point came with the appearance of Web 2.0 in the early years of the 21st century. The arrival of Web 2.0 produced a fundamental change: the creation of the *prosumer*. The concept of a prosumer merges

the producer and the consumer of a product into a single person. Internet users no longer maintain the classic producer-consumer relationship, but rather now unite both characteristics in one individual. One special characteristic of this definition, from the point of view of economics and consumption, can be transferred to the world of communications, where the equation is similar, with information senders and receivers.

Web 1.0 offered one-way communication, with one sender and many receivers (the one-to-many model). The move to Web 2.0 brought about an essential change in communication, from one-way to two-way communication, while one-to-many, with its single sender and multiple receivers, changed to many-to-many (Eickelman and Anderson 2003). Senders became, in turn, receivers, thus creating the new figure. The user in this role does not only send, but also becomes a receiver, while the user-receiver also sends. This has led to the appearance of countless blogs[5], podcasts (Scholz et al. 2008:457-509), videocasts[6], forums, (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009) and chatrooms with Islamic content.

Although this development has clearly opened up an expanding space for expression, this does not mean that it has paved the way to global democratisation and revolutionary anti-establishmentarianism, as authors such as Roy (2003) have discussed in detail. Eickelman and Anderson (2003), however, have shown that a public sphere has opened up where new ideas and positions are flowing and that new voices that once could not be heard have found a space on the Internet through blogs, videos, chatrooms and forums. New voices and ideas can now be heard, even if, as Roy has noted, the message is becoming homogenised. Indeed, despite the tendency towards homogenisation, the expansion and proliferation of voices unheard before the appearance of new information and communication technologies can take their message to a global level. In this respect, Internet sites have appeared with positions that distance themselves from Muslim orthodoxy, such as stances that are feminist (http://feminismeislamic.org/) or homosexual (http://amho.es/), that advocate progressive views and even those that feature preachers with no official studies (http://amrkhaled.net/newsite/).

It is possible that this new space for expression is dedicated more to publicity than to debate, as Mohammed El-Nawawy and Sahar Khamis (2009) have noted. These researchers sought key conceptual tools in the works of Jurgen Habermas and Lincoln Dahlberg to reach conclusions regarding the lack of a discursive rational-critical debate, in this way qualifying the concept of an Islamic public sphere. However, it must be added that in part, new information and communication technologies are simply one more form of the media and that, just as occurs with the other mass media (radio, television, the printed press), senders/broadcasters are trying to reach the largest audience possible (Informe Semanal). This could assume some dependence on the public as far as content is concerned, although only to a point, since there is a broad range of material on the Internet that does not share this need and this contribution is, to a large extent, non-profit. Much of this altruistic material is related to blogs, videoblogs and podcasts.

2. e-Islam in Spain

2.1. Methodology

The goal of this paper is to discover the characteristics of the Spanish Islamic virtual public sphere. To this end, an online observation of Islamic sites in Spain was carried out over the last year and the sites were contrasted with the Spanish Islamic institutional panorama in the offline world. Once this comparison was made, an analysis of the characteristics of these online platforms was done, focusing on the users' interaction mechanisms. Another part of the research focused on the search for individual and group platforms in the virtual world and an analysis of the characteristics of their content in order to decode their degree of diversity.

2.2. The glocalisation of the Islamic public sphere

In the context of the new information and communication technologies, where globalisation and transnationality predominate, voices emerged suggesting that the time had come when all content and products would

follow a process of homogenisation[7] as a consequence of globalisation. This globalising homogenisation did not, however, occur as predicted, but rather resulted in a process of glocalisation where local events became global through the media (the combination of global and local produces "glocal"). This study argues that the model of the Islamic virtual public sphere in Spain be inserted into this context, since - despite the transnational aspect and external influences - there is an element of idiosyncrasy in the situation of Muslims in Spain that makes it possible to create a smaller local space, albeit within a globalising context. [8]

2.3. The Islamic virtual public sphere in Spain

The Islamic virtual public sphere is exactly as Jan Scholz described for the general world of Islam on the Internet: "it is not a mere reproduction of structures existing in the "real world". Dominant authorities within the Muslim world are [...] underrepresented on the World Wide Web."[9] (Scholz et al. 2008:464).

Indeed, the Islamic public sphere does not merely represent what occurs offline, as is clearly seen in several specific points:

> • The large number of personal blogs proliferating in the Spanish Islamic public sphere highlights the capacity for individual participation in the online world. The potential impact of these opinions becomes transnational and global. This reflects the great inclusive capacity of this new emerging sphere with regard to the participation of citizens.
> • These differences between the offline and online worlds are also seen in the world of institutionalised Islam. The online sphere reveals the important role of the Spanish Islamic Board (Junta Islámica) and its entire milieu[10] in comparison with other organisations like the Spanish Federation of Islamic Religious Entities (FEERI), which is totally missing from the virtual public sphere, and Union of Islamic Communities in Spain (UCIDE), which is not among the first sites produced by searches, since it

has opted for a blog format. These characteristics do not mirror the process of Muslim institutionalisation occurring in Spain in the offline world, where the importance of UCIDE and FEERI, both of whom signed the Cooperation Agreement between the Spanish State and the Islamic Commission of Spain (CIE) and have acted as intermediaries for the administration for the purpose of monitoring the agreement, is greater than for the Spanish Islamic Board.

• Another aspect to consider is the globalisation of cyberspace, which has led to the increased participation of external actors using the new information and communication technologies in the Spanish Islamic public sphere:

•• Some external actors produce Islamic content for consumption in the original language, including websites accessed from Spain in a foreign language or with advanced translation tools.[11]

•• Some external actors offer their content translated from another language into Spanish.[12]

•• Other external actors influencing the Spanish Islamic virtual sphere are native Spanish speakers who are not addressing Spaniards, but rather residents in their own country of origin.[13] Despite this, these sites are available for any user browsing the Internet from Spain and, since search engines list them among their top results, Spanish users can access these sites while searching for Islamic content.

2.3.1. Institutionalised Islam online

As in the offline world (Bravo 2010), institutionalised Islam has produced a process to create websites that parallels the creation of new groups. Thus, for example, UCIDE not only maintains its website (http://es.ucide.org/home/), but has also carried out a process for creating Internet sites and blogs associated with this organisation.[14] The virtual sphere also reflects a trend occurring offline with FEERI, which is undergoing

a process of low representation, since the group's web domain (http://www.feeri.info/) is up for sale. It ceased operations in March 2008 (Semanario Islámico 2008), after operating for several years.

At the same time, websites from groups that are not incorporated into the main Spanish Muslim federations or the CIE are being produced. [15] Groups that have decided to create Internet sites include the site of the Valencia Community's Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (CISCOVA http://www.ciscova.org/) in 2009,[16] the site for the Islamic Federation of the Autonomous Regions of the Balearic Islands (http://www.federacionislamica.com/) created in 2008, and the Federation of Muslim Communities of Castile-La Mancha's site (FECOM http://www.fecomclm.com/).

Other types of associations, cultural centres and institutions within institutionalised Islam have also sought a way to reach a greater public despite their small size. This group is very diverse, ranging from mosques offering online information, like the Granada Mosque, which created its own website (http://www.mezquitadegranada.com/) in 2008, to women's groups like the Union of Muslim Women in Spain (UMME), which created its own site (http://umme.es/index1.html). It is also possible to find websites and blogs from local associations like the website of the Torre Pacheco Islamic Clemency Cultural Association, whose website (http://www.islamclemencia.org/) was created in 2010.

One important element to consider when analysing these web sites is that the absence of some key groups like CIE and FEERI in the virtual sphere indicates that this form of media is not a priority for the communication strategies of these organisations. However – and bearing in mind that this medium makes it possible for users to interact and provide feedback on information – the lack of a presence on the Internet also means a lack of proximity, accessibility and interaction for these organisations with their base and with citizens in general, since they are closing the door to this type of communication, despite the relatively low cost of the service.

For organisations that can be found in the virtual sphere, such as those analysed above, it is clear that they are carrying out an experimental communication process. The question that must be asked in this respect, then, is: what type of communication do these organisations offer through their websites?

The UCIDE's website offers their information as if it were a traditional form of mass media like television, radio and the printed press, despite the fact that users can browse their content. The possibility of interaction is blocked for the receiver/user, as the site does not offer any channels for feedback in the communication loop. In this respect, communication is established following the one-way model with one sender and many receivers. The result is a communication model like a notice board on which contents are posted, which in this case is in the virtual sphere, reflecting the traditional communication model with one sender and one or more receivers, with one message and very little dynamism. The same occurs with the UCID Castile-La Mancha blog. The virtual platforms established by UCID Valencia, UCID Catalonia, UCID Murcia, UCID Extremadura and UCID Basque Country allow some minimal participation by users. These platforms let users send e-mails to the administration and post comments on some of the content published by the administrators. CISCOVA, FECOM, the Granada Mosque and the Torre Pacheco Islamic Clemency Cultural Association[17] offer similar options to contact the website administrators using a form. The Islamic Federation of the Autonomous Regions of the Balearic Islands offers an e-mail address to contact the organisation, while UMME offers a consultancy service that can be accessed using e-mail, and the website promises a forum in the future.

In this context, the role of the Spanish Islamic Board and the Webislam website (http://www.webislam.com/) merit discussion. The Spanish Islamic Board, despite its relatively low importance in the institutionalising process in Spain (Bravo 2010), maintains the Webislam.com portal. This is one of the most important websites in the Spanish Islamic virtual sphere. [18] Unlike the sites analysed above, Webislam offers an Internet site with more possibilities for interaction. One of the routes for this interaction is using a

form to contact the members of the board of consultants. This mechanism is similar to that offered by the Torre Pacheco Islamic Clemency Cultural Association. However, Webislam's interaction goes further: one part of this website is designed to promote user interaction. This section is divided into nine sections: 'I'm the journalist', 'Surveys', 'Breaking News', 'Most Viewed', 'Most Voted', 'Bulletin', 'Corrections', 'Contact' and 'Chat'.

The 'I'm the journalist' section offers users the chance to work as a journalist, sending in news, comments, opinion articles, videos, and more. Different forms are available to send in these collaborations. The same section invites users to be correspondents or consultants, to report on events, cultural spots, business and associations. Here, it is particularly interesting that the user does not only provide feedback, but also becomes part of the editorial team and has a direct impact on the website's contents. The second section, 'Surveys', lets users participate in successive surveys. The third section, 'Breaking News', presents the latest news stories offered on Webislam. Although it is included in the section established for participation, this particular activity is not interactive, since users cannot affect the content. The fourth and fifth sections, 'Most Viewed' and 'Most Voted', list the news items most often viewed and voted by users. This section is interactive, since this list is created from user participation. The first of these options records the number of times that a certain piece of content has been accessed, while the second lets the user evaluate the content by casting a vote.

The 'Bulletin' section lets users subscribe to, or cancel a subscription to, a news bulletin that is sent by e-mail. This section does not provide any space for significant direct interaction, although it does promote user loyalty, which encourages proximity and indirect interaction. Entering the 'Corrections' section opens a form that the user can send to the website administrators with a proposal to correct some content. The user, then, once again can affect the content. The eighth section is dedicated to contacting the board of consultants mentioned above, while the ninth section, 'Chat', lets users contact other users to exchange impressions and connect. The Webislam forum, which is open to different types of debate, is found in another area of the website. Webislam's broad promotion of participation sets this site apart

from other sites on the Internet promoted by institutionalised Islam and serves as an example of two-way and many-to-many communication.

Despite Junta Islámica´s efforts trying to renew its communication platform and style it can be considered that the communication strategies of the Spanish institutionalized organizations are poorly adapted to the new requirements of the Spanish Muslim community. This is because these types of cyber environments are based on a traditional view of media, based on a monolithic top-down view of power (Cambridge 2010), but a great number of Muslims in Spain feel misrepresented by the community leaders and therefore have decided to go online by their own using the potential of the web 2.0 apps.

2.3.2. The rise of new forms of expression

After this analysis of institutionalised Islam, it is time to study the voices rising outside of the institutional setting.[19] This phenomenon is very representative of the virtual sphere and has opened new forms of expression for other types of opinions that have very little presence in the offline public sphere, but in the online public sphere have the potential for global impact. The most notable of these new expressions of online Islam concerns blogs.

Many blogs have been created in the Spanish Islamic virtual sphere. These include examples like Islamgurea (http://wwwislamgurea.blogspot.com/) by Daud Khan, a Spanish convert, who has also created other blogs: Islamgurea TV (http://islamgureavideo.blogspot.com/) and Jardines del Alma (http://losjardinesdelalma.blogspot.com/). There are also blogs by individuals connected to the Spanish Islamic Board, such as the blogs posted by Ndeye Andujar (http://ndeyeandujar.wordpress.com/) and Abdennur Prado (http://abdennurprado.wordpress.com/). All of these blogs are by Muslim converts in the Spanish Islamic virtual sphere as are - as the very names suggest - *Diario de una conversa* (Diary of a Convert), posted by Tasmin Mus (http://diariodeunaconversa.blogspot.com/) and *Conversos al Islam* (Converts to Islam) by Zaynatbl (http://conversosalislam.blogspot.com/). A large number of these blogs, as can be seen, are created

by individuals using their own names, while others express their opinions in groups, such as Karbala, a blog dedicated to "Shiite Muslims across Spain" (http://shiahispania.blogspot.com/). This blog is produced by Pedro González, Jafar Abdellah, Salvador Jafer, Alí and Tawhid and is associated with the Al-Qaim Islamic Centre.

In all of the blogs discussed to this point, the contributions predominantly represent a religious point of view and the world of believers. However, other approaches come from different spheres, such as the blog Araboislámica (http://www.araboislamica.blogspot.com/), which is based in a university setting. Nine professors from the University of Alicante connected with Arabic and Islamic studies and Arabic language studies use this forum to put forth their approach to Arabic and Islamic culture and history. The Spanish Islamic virtual sphere also offers examples of websites inscribed within these new forms of expressions of Islam. Examples include the site from Hashim Cabrera, a Muslim convert with connections to the Spanish Islamic Board, who has his own website (http://www.hashimcabrera.com/).

Several open forums are also available to discuss topics related to Islam and Muslims. These spaces serve as a meeting point for different opinions, and the debates proposed are extremely diverse. Examples include Mundomusulmanas (http://mundomusulmanas.creatuforo.com/), Musulmanas e Islam (Muslims and Islam) (http://musulmanaseislam.6forum.info/forum.htm), Foro de musulmanas (Muslim forum) (http://www.musulmanas.org/foro/index.php), and Musulmanas Artes Aplicadas (Applied Muslim Arts) (http://artesaplicadas.foroespana.com/portal.htm). These forums particularly focus on topics relating to women.

This shows that many Muslims in Spain are trying to express their way of understanding Islam and their concerns using a new model of communication bottom-up, because they want to take part in the decision-making process, because a great number of them feel misrepresented by the traditional Spanish Muslims associations. Therefore, Spanish Muslims are creating an interlinking cyber-network trying to create a pluralistic debate arena.

2.3.3. Commercial Islam online

This last section devoted to the different Muslim forms of expression in the Spanish virtual sphere presents commercial variations appearing on the Internet. This form of participation provides a possibility for creating Islamic businesses that currently focus on selling products related to culture and, specifically, to Islamic literature. These initiatives include online bookshops like e-Andalus (http://www.e-andalus.com/joomla/) and Islam Libros (http://www.islamlibros.com/), as well as Madrasa Editorial (http://www.madrasaeditorial.com/). These few initiatives could in the future expand to different areas such as the promotion of Islamic banking online, the sale of *halal* products through new technologies, and Islamic religious products.

3. Conclusions

This study has discussed different topics affecting the Islamic virtual public sphere in Spain. It has shown that this sphere is ruled by the same trends as the offline public sphere, but that there are significant differences that make this a field of special interest. New information and communication technologies offer a public space, but that does not mean that they cease to be a medium for communication. In this respect, the presence and absence of actors in the online sphere make it possible to learn about the groups seeking greater media impact. Here, CIE and FEERI are behind in their media impact using the new technologies, as they are in the public offline sphere. In turn, the presence of different actors and their forms of communication in the Islamic public virtual sphere make it possible to know the perspective of the different actors with respect to the medium itself. It also reveals the relationship between the different actors and potential users and bases, corroborating Malcolm McLuhan's famous saying, "the medium is the message" (McLuhan and Fiore 1967).

Most of the institutionalised Islamic organisations in Spain have chosen to consider only the communicative aspects of the new technologies, as if they were dealing with the mass media, following the one-to-many and one-way models. However, other actors displaced by the institutionalising process,

such as the Webislam and Spanish Islamic Board sites, have opted to use the many-to-many and two-way models. The concern on the part of the administrators of these websites to consider this medium as a fundamental mechanism in their communication strategies can be seen in how they have positioned their sites high on the results pages of the most widely used search engines in Spain. This, of course, means that the site receives more visitors.

Additionally, the adoption of new information and communication technologies has created a public sphere for expressing opinions found outside official channels. It may be that this sphere does not manage to achieve the depth of what Habermas and Dahlberg term a rational-critical public sphere, as El-Nawawy and Khamis suggest, but it does create a space for a diversity of opinions with a potential for global impact, which were limited to a smaller sphere before these new technologies appeared. The appearance of these new forms of expression is contributing a range of different opinions from individuals who could not find a way to express themselves through institutional channels.

This study has shown that institutionalised Islam in Spain uses the one-way and one-to-many communicative model in the Spanish virtual Islamic sphere, making the participation of voices outside the editorial current of these Internet sites impossible. Whether it is because these individuals and groups do not feel represented by these institutions, or because these institutions do not provide channels for expression, this fact has facilitated the appearance of new Muslim voices that have found a niche to communicate their opinions through the new information and communication technologies, thus satisfying a demand that existed before.

Acknowledgements

new information and communication technologies on the Spanish Islamic public sphere.

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Notes

[1] According to Eurostat 2008, in Spain, 46% of the total population used the Internet to search for information about goods and services. This figure was 50% for the entire European Union population. Eurostat data available from the Ministerio de Industria y Comercio: "*Observatorio Nacional de las Telecomunicación y de la Sociedad de la Información.*" 2010. <http://www.ontsi.red.es/index.action>

[2] The contents available through new information and communication technologies are particularly diverse. Some of the different forms of audiovisual communication that can be found thanks to this new technology include Internet sites, blogs, podcasts, videoblogs, e-mail, chatrooms and forums.

[3] In this respect, a sample of information produced in Spain relating to photographs of the March 11 2004 terrorist attack is appropriate here. At that time, Judge Del Olmo ordered the website ogrish.com, where these photos appeared, to be blocked, although they could later be found on other websites and peer-to-peer (P2P) platforms like e-mule. More information can be found at: Noticiasdot.com. "*Imágenes y Videos Del 11-M Siguen En Ogrish. Com.*" November 2004. http://www.noticiasdot.com/publicaciones/2004/1104/0211/noticias021104/noticias021104-14.htm

[4] To learn about the difference between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0, as well as the history of the creation of the concept of Web 2.0, see: O´Reilly, Tim. "What is Web 2.0. Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software." *O´Reilly Media* Sep/30/2005 2005 Web. <http://oreilly.com/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html#mememap>

[5] Examples of blogs can be found on the Internet through a simple search that includes the words Islam and blog. However, some authors have already focused on analysing this phenomenon, for example: The Research, Information and Communication Unit. "Estimating Network Size and Tracking Information Dissemination Amongst Islamic Blogs." (2010)

[6] These examples are from: www.islamictube.net

[7] For a broader reflection on globalisation and glocalisation, see: Klein, Naomi. *No Logo: El Poder De Las Marcas.* Paidós, 2000.

[8] Many studies have shown the differences that affect Muslims in Spain and the external interferences in and influences on the group in Spain. However, neither the globalising context nor the many differences between Muslim groups in the setting should be lost sight of.

[9] For more information on the debate between 'real' and 'virtual', see Calleja, Gordon. "Virtual Worlds Today: Gaming and Online Sociality." *Online Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 3.1 (2008)

[10] The Spanish Islamic Board sponsors several Internet sites like: http://www.juntaislamica.org/; http://www.alagua.org/; http://www.webislam.com; http://www.institutohalal.com/; and http://www.vidahalal.com/, as well as several blogs by their members.

[11] Google Translate, for example, lets users see a translation of the content as if it were the Internet site itself.

[12] A large number of sites with these features exist, such as the Shiite site Al-Islam.org from the Ahlul Bayt Digital Islamic Library Project at: http://www.al-islam.org/ which offers a version translated into Spanish at: http://www.al-islam.org/index.php?inl_language=spanish.

[13] One example that illustrates this point is Islam.com.mx from the *Centro Cultural Islámico de México, A.C.*, at: http://www.islam.com.mx/index.php.

[14] In their original Spanish: UCIDValencia (http://www.ucidvalencia.org/), UCIDCataluña (http://ucidecatalunya.blogspot.com/), UCIDMurcia (http://ucidmurcia.blogspot.com/), UCIDExtremadura (http://islamextremadura.blogspot.com/), UCIDPaís Vasco (http://assalambilbao.blogspot.com/), UCIDCastilla-La Mancha (http://islamancha.blogspot.com/). This list does not include the websites for UCIDCeuta, UCIDCastilla León, UCIDAragón and UCIDMadrid.

[15] It is important to remember that the Islamic Commission of Spain (CIE) is the Spanish organisation that represents Muslims to the state, and is formed jointly by the UCIDE and the FEERI. This organisation does not have an active website. Doing an Internet search to find this site using the acronym CIE on google.es or es.yahoo.com can produce an error, since a search using CIE produces results linked to the address of the Islamic Community in Spain, which uses the acronym CIE in its site heading, although it is not related to the Islamic Commission of Spain, but to the Granada Mosque (contact data for this website available at: http://www.cislamica.org/contactanos/index.html).

[16] Data on creating a website were obtained from the sites themselves. If this information is not available at the site, a search was done at alexa.com to obtain it. If I have not included this information, it is because none of these sources provided it.

[17] The Torre Pacheco Islamic Clemency Cultural Association offers the option of making contact using a form or e-mail. This virtual platform is unique in that it offers the option of sending the question via a form to a specific person at the association, since consultations can be sent directly to an individual.

[18] In the main Spanish search engines, google.es and es.yahoo.com, Webislam.com appears in the top positions if the search is done using the keyword 'Islam'. None of the Internet sites for the associations described in this section are included among the top ten results produced by the search engines if the search is done using the Spanish keywords: '*Islam*', '*musulmán*' or '*islámico*'.

[19] Here, I have considered all of the examples with cyber-Islamic content that are not directly associated with any organisation, although they may have an indirect relationship with organisations and institutions.

Review: Islam Dot Com: Contemporary Islamic Discourses in Cyberspace

Vit Sisler

Mohammed el-Nawawy and Sahar Khamis. Islam Dot Com: Contemporary Islamic Discourses in Cyberspace. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. ISBN: 978-0-230-60035-5, ISBN10: 0-230-60035-2, 280 pages.

With growing Internet penetration rates and the proliferation of new media outlets in the Muslim world there is a simultaneously growing academic interest in possible social and political changes endorsed by these media. Whereas pioneering studies on the impact of the Internet in the Muslim world originated within the domain of Middle Eastern or Islamic studies, such as the work of Jon Anderson, Gary Bunt, or Daniel Martin Varisco, in recent years we have witnessed a growing interest in this field from scholars with backgrounds in communications studies. A recent contribution to this rapidly expanding body of research has been provided by Mohammed El-Nawawy from the School of Communication at Queens University in Charlotte and by Sahar Khamis from the Department of Communication at the University of Maryland. They have co-authored a book called Islam Dot Com: Contemporary Islamic Discourses in Cyberspace, which deals with the virtual Muslim public sphere and the contestation of and deliberation over religious authority and Muslim identity online.

The book analyzes the discourses and deliberations in the discussion forums of three of the most visited Islamic websites, namely IslamOnline.net, AmrKhaled.net, and IslamWay.com. In doing so, it explores the potential impact of the Islamic public sphere and the reconfiguration of the "virtual umma" (i.e. Islamic community) on the creation of multiple identities and resistances, which manifest themselves through various Islamic discourses

Corresponding author: Vít Šisler, Charles University, U Kříže 8, Praha 5, 158 00, Czech Republic. E-mail: vit.sisler@ff.cuni.cz

online. The book stems from extensive fieldwork and textual analysis of the deliberations taking place on the discussion boards of the above-mentioned websites. The fieldwork stretched over a period of six months, from February to July 2008, and therefore provides a solid empirical base for the subsequent analysis and argumentation. Overall, the whole book is characterized by unprecedented conceptual and empirical richness as well as by a unique combination of English and Arabic sources.

El-Nawawy and Khamis suggest that today many young Muslims live in societies that are going through transitional phases with an uncertain future. Therefore, many of them are trying to find refuge in their religion, and they are seeking religious figures that they can look up to as role models and sources of guidance that can help them make sense of their surroundings and reconstruct their identity. El-Nawawy and Khamis also believe that many traditional Islamic authorities have failed to understand the mentality of the young Muslims or to gain their trust and confidence. This, in turn, has caused many young Muslims to flock to the Internet, where many of them have found the coherence and ontological trust that they have been looking for on Islamic websites. This phenomenon is, according to El-Nawawy and Khamis, particularly relevant to immigrant or diasporic Muslim communities who rely on modern forms of communication to preserve their religious identities and where the vibrant discussions and interactions via the Internet can be viewed as a "virtual ritual" of "identity making." As a result, the virtual umma is characterized by both feelings of uniformity, as well as diversity and plurality, among its members. The quality of the public sphere in which these deliberations and discussions take place lies at the heart of El-Nawawy and Khamis' research.

Essentially, Islam Dot Com draws upon Habermas' theory of the public sphere, which calls for a "rational-critical" communication, outside the institutional boundaries of the authority, as "the ideal standard of modernity." In analyzing the content of the above-mentioned Islamic discussion forums, El-Nawawy and Khamis compared the discourses found therein with a set of requirements of the public sphere as developed by Jürgen Habermas and further refined by Lincoln Dahlberg. By doing so,

they aimed at investigating whether the public sphere of rational-critical discourse is extended through these Islamic websites and to examine the applicability of the Habermasian concepts to discourses in the discussion forums being studied (under review).

One of the most distinguishing features of the book is its deep theoretical insight and vast command of academic literature on the subject. Especially the two opening chapters, i.e. "The Public Sphere in an Islamic Context" and "Religion in the Virtual Public Sphere: The Case of Islam," provide rich, state-of-the-discipline literary reviews, which alone will be valuable to scholars and researchers across the communications discipline and Middle Eastern or Islamic studies. The same academic rigor, coupled with a vast number of examples and case studies, is manifested throughout the whole book. Chapter 3, "Is the Umma a Public Sphere?", provides an exhaustive overview of the historical context behind the development of the concept of the umma throughout different phases of Islamic history and examines the applicability of the public sphere criteria to it. Chapter 4, "The Virtual Umma: Collective Identities in Cyberspace," explores how new media, especially the Internet, have reformulated and redefined the concept of the umma online. Special focus is given to the creation of what El-Nawawy and Khamis call "collective Muslim identities." Therefore, the bulk of this chapter is devoted to a detailed textual analysis of postings on the discussion boards of the Islamic websites being studied, in an effort to examine how they reflect these collective Muslim identities online. Finally, Chapter 5, "Islamic Websites: Divergent Identities in Cyberspace," analyzes how different, or even conflicting, identities emerged through the various discussion boards in the three analyzed websites.

Fundamentally, El-Nawawy and Khamis argue that most of the threads analyzed reflected a "non-deliberative" public sphere, where participants were keen on establishing and reinforcing their religious and ideological beliefs, but they were less apt to support civil discourse on topics that did not easily lend themselves to opinion change and consensus. El-Nawawy and Khamis suggest that the anonymity and easy accessibility that are made possible through these forums have contributed to creating a non-

deliberative environment, rather than improving the quality of a truly rational-critical Habermasian discourse.

Therefore, on a more general level, Islam Dot Com highlights the limitations of using the Internet to enhance civic participation and actual democratic practices. Given the conventional link between the Internet and democratization, which has until recently dominated literature on new media and societies in transition, El-Nawawy and Khamis' work provides us with a great and much needed contribution to the understanding of the religion-technology interactions in diverse Muslim contexts. Similarly, its grand scope and theoretical richness make it an indispensable source for any researcher dealing with the Internet, information and communication technology, and the contemporary Muslim world.

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