Empowering publics: Information Technology and democratization in the Arab World—Lessons from Internet cafés and beyond

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Executive summary

With the increasing diffusion of the Internet, especially in authoritarian societies, scholars have sought to identify this technology’s effects on politics at the grass roots. By analyzing newly collected ethnographic data on the meanings of the Internet for everyday people and politics in the Arab World, this paper questions whether or not we are likely to see a shift towards enhanced civic engagement and demands on the state in the region as more and more citizens become Internet users. The data analyzed for this article were collected during 5 months of Internet café research in Jordan and Egypt during January-May 2004. The goal of this study was to uncover whether or not the Internet was an important part of everyday life for the average, or below average, citizen in the Arab World. Also key in the study was to identify the ways in which the Internet mattered to their lives. Those interviewed were not prompted to think of the Internet as a political tool. Rather, they were asked, in an open-ended fashion, to narrate ‘How and if the Internet had changed their lives?’ The answers to this question, and 49 others, provided a rich canvas against which to understand the draw of the lower and middle classes to the technology. Together, their responses tended to coalesce around one of three main themes in terms of the Internet’s relevance to their lives:

(i) Boundary-crossing and the politics of gender
(ii) Developing political consciousness and broadening horizons
(iii) Enhancing life chances and personal skills

After a brief introduction and an overview of Internet diffusion in the Arab world, each of these themes, and a selection of the narrative samples which created them, is examined below. The larger survey is part of a book-length study of the meaning and implication of the information society in the Arab World.
Introduction

Developing countries are under great global pressures to adopt and promote digital transformation within state and society. They face such pressures both in order to stimulate their fledgling economies, and in order to obtain foreign aid. With digital transformation well underway in non-democratic countries as diverse as China, Malaysia, Bahrain, Jordan and Morocco, scholars have sought to identify cracks in the foundations of authoritarian rule. Yet given the persistence of authoritarian regimes, in spite of Internet use and diffusion, many scholars have moderated their expectations. For some, this toning down of expectation has come by recognizing the multiple uses of the Internet, both as an enhancer of state power as well as a promoter of new conversations in global civil society and cyberspace. In the Arab world, part of this pessimism comes from the practice of government filtering, best illustrated by the work of Jonathan Zittrain and his colleagues in the Open Net Initiative. As illustrated below, despite government attempts at censorship, the Internet is creating new patterns of interaction and activism, often too subtle to be interpreted by the state as threatening.

In Western contexts, pessimists have pointed fingers at the Internet for its demise of community and associational life, for its promotion of a politics as usual (e.g. promoting the power of the already powerful, and further marginalizing the weak), for its promotion of xenophobia and hate. In the developing world, pessimists have talked about how ‘open networks’ have not

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5 The Open Net Initiative can be accessed at www.opennetinitiative.org Reports on Internet filtering in the Middle East are available for the following countries: Yemen, Tunisia, Iran, Bahrain, UAE and Saudi Arabia. Full reports on each of these countries are available for free download from this site. The reports suggest that Iran followed by Tunisia and Saudi Arabia are the most aggressive at filtering the web. All of these countries use software created and sold by companies in the United States. Studies of the two countries analyzed in this article, Jordan and Egypt, are not currently available from the Open Net site.

The Internet in both cases can be held accountable for perpetuating power inequalities among citizens, between individuals and the state, and among countries and regions. In spite of cyber pessimism, and the persistence of many pre-existing power hierarchies and inequalities in the digital age, cyber optimists maintain that the proof for their enthusiasm is in the gaze. One must not look for change in all the usual places (Parliament, for example) if one is to fully grasp the Internet’s potential for what James Turner Johnson calls, ‘stimulating the growth of democracy in non-democratic states’. 8

This article identifies ways in which the Internet in the Arab World has the potential to ‘create the conditions for free association’ as a step towards building a more democratic culture and c Civically engaged public. 9 This is not just an exercise in theory, but rather, an analysis grounded in the insights and experiences of 230 Internet users in Jordan and Egypt. Through this analysis, the subtle political meanings of the Internet are identified, with attention to the informal politics of everyday life. Those surveyed represent typical Internet users, e.g. those users who are not rich enough to have Internet access at home, who are not employed in white collar professions where they have regular Internet access at work, and who have incorporated Internet use into their daily lives by regularly visiting an Internet café (on average about 12 hours per week for those surveyed). Students included in the sample generally attended government schools or local universities, and were not among the elite families who could afford to send their children to private schools or universities abroad. This analysis supports the observations of Augustus Richard Norton, that the most creative energies for political reform in the region are likely to flow bottom up, rather than top down. He notes,

I argue that elements of civil society are the most likely source of creative thinking on political reform. In addition, and on the strength of recent evidence, there is reason for confidence that when the iron fist of autocracy loosens its grip on power, the resulting space for political dialogue and debate will be filled by nonviolent groups of men and women intent upon improving their life chances. 10

The analysis below illustrates in a fundamental way support for Norton’s optimism. Narratives of the Internet’s meaning and utility for citizens of Jordan and Egypt suggest that the technology might loosen the grip of exclusionary practices, both society’s and the state’s. The Internet holds great potential for widening the experiences, interactions and opportunities of the majority of citizens who are potentially excluded from normal power avenues including state-based patronage regimes and powerful merchant classes and networks. The Internet has the capability to breed and spread new forms of regional

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7 Kalathil and Boas at n. 4.
9 Ibid.
cosmopolitanism which increase the likelihood of an average citizen to interact with people, communities, and opinions outside his or her normal community networks.

Ian Shapiro has observed that, ‘democratic habits of thoughts and action have to be learned through practice in everyday life.’\(^{11}\) Whereas Shapiro goes on to conclude that, ‘there is no convincing reason to think that this will occur in an authoritarian political culture,’ the evidence below suggests that the rise of the Internet provides opportunities for integrating democratic habits and the opportunity to improve one’s life chances into ordinary people’s lives, even in the face of persistent authoritarianism. According to interviews with Internet café users in Jordan and Egypt, one of the real magnetisms of the technology is its ability to enable users to interact with people and views beyond the reach of their normal social networks. As seen in the evidence below, with Internet use, political debate is promoted, class, gender and national boundary lines are regularly and openly breached. According to John Stewart Mill, and others, such encounters are the foundations for creating a democratic culture. Assessing whether or not such encounters will take Arab citizens closer to open political opportunities remains to be seen; but viewed in light of significant steps in this direction such as the Syrian withdrawal of troops from Lebanon in the face of technologically coordinated mass public demonstrations and the employment of mobile communications in the struggle for women’s voting rights in Kuwait and beyond, we have good reason to pay closer attention to the subtle political engagements taking place in Internet cafés.

1. Internet diffusion in the Arab World

Internet use began in the Arab World in the early 1990s but in the beginning, access was afforded to only a small minority of the population (in some cases less than 0.1%). Tunisia was the first Arab country to link to the Internet (1991). Kuwait established Internet services in 1992 as a part of its reconstruction after the Iraqi invasion. In 1993, Egypt, Turkey and the UAE established links to the Internet. Jordan linked to the Internet in 1994; while Syria and Saudi Arabia were the slowest states in the region to allow public access to the Internet. There, regular access was not available until the late 1990s. When we study the development and meaning of the Internet in the Arab world, we are thus looking at a short, but rapidly changing history. The latest estimates suggest that Internet use in the Middle East and North Africa is growing at a rate higher than any other place in the world. Between the years 2000-2005, Internet access rates grew at a measure of around 411.4% (compounded growth).\(^{12}\)


Table 1. Regional connectivity figures: 2005 (Internet World Stats)

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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>32,557,738</td>
<td>50,000</td>
<td>500,000</td>
<td>900.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahrain</td>
<td>707,357</td>
<td>40,000</td>
<td>195,700</td>
<td>389.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>69,954,717</td>
<td>450,000</td>
<td>3,000,000</td>
<td>566.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>68,458,680</td>
<td>250,000</td>
<td>4,800,000</td>
<td>1820.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>26,095,283</td>
<td>12,500</td>
<td>25,000</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>6,986,639</td>
<td>1,270,000</td>
<td>3,040,000</td>
<td>139.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>5,788,340</td>
<td>127,300</td>
<td>457,000</td>
<td>259.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuwait</td>
<td>2,530,012</td>
<td>150,000</td>
<td>567,000</td>
<td>278.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>4,461,995</td>
<td>300,000</td>
<td>500,000</td>
<td>66.07%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libya</td>
<td>5,980,693</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>160,000</td>
<td>1166.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>31,003,311</td>
<td>100,000</td>
<td>1,000,000</td>
<td>900.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oman</td>
<td>2,398,545</td>
<td>90,000</td>
<td>180,000</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palestine (West Bank)</td>
<td>3,997,861</td>
<td>35,000</td>
<td>145,000</td>
<td>314.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qatar</td>
<td>768,464</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>140,800</td>
<td>369.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>21,771,609</td>
<td>200,000</td>
<td>1,500,000</td>
<td>650.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>18,586,743</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>610,000</td>
<td>1933.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>10,116,314</td>
<td>100,000</td>
<td>630,000</td>
<td>530.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>73,598,181</td>
<td>2,000,000</td>
<td>6,000,000</td>
<td>200.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Arab Emirates</td>
<td>3,750,054</td>
<td>735,000</td>
<td>1,110,200</td>
<td>51.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td>19,600,009</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>100,000</td>
<td>566.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Middle East and North Africa</td>
<td>459,112,545</td>
<td>5,994,800</td>
<td>24,660,700</td>
<td>411.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Connectivity may be even higher than is estimated by conventional measures because of the large number of people in the region who use Internet cafés or community access point (such as Publinet centers in Tunisia and Knowledge Stations in Jordan).13 Jordan even made the Guinness Book of World Records for the highest concentration of Internet cafés anywhere in the world. There are more than 200 Internet cafés on a single street in Irbid, Jordan.

Table 2. Number of Internet cafés in countries of the Arab World

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number of Internet cafés</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number of Internet cafés</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>3000</td>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>2150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahrain</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>Palestine</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>Qatar</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuwait</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libya</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>UAE</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oman</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Madar Research (2002)\(^{14}\)

Thus, in Algeria there are an estimated 9.52 cafés per 100,000 inhabitants. Similarly, in Libya, where there are an estimated 13.21 Internet cafés per 100,000 inhabitants. Given the difficulties in determining what percentage of the population has access to the Internet via Internet cafés, it is hard to judge the exact number of Internet users in the Arab World. If in places like Algeria and Morocco, there is enough public demand for the Internet to support two or three thousand Internet cafés, then the Internet must be more of a mass-based technology than any one analyst has yet to discover. More important than just understanding how many go online at a public access point is comprehending what this general public does with the tool once they have access.

User access is an important measure of the degree to which a society has built the infrastructure to support an information society and the political, social and economic norms which characterize it. Counting the number of Internet users within a society, however, tells us little about how such technology is leveraged by citizens in the ebb and flow of everyday life. This is especially apparent when attempting to understand civic engagement and the Internet, because ‘the democratic potential’ of the technology is, as one scholar observes, ‘indeterminate and must be worked out in the context of local constellations of power.’\(^{15}\) One can glimpse the local constellations of power and resistance among Internet communities in the Arab World by considering the testimony of Internet café users.

This study provides a first glimpse at an unexplored territory—namely the attitudes, activities, and activism of Internet café users in the Middle East and North Africa, a region which the World Bank in 1997 labeled as one of the most resistant places in the world to institutionalized democracy. By


\(^{15}\) Lim at n. 3, p. 113.
conducting interviews in Internet cafés, this study provides windows on the ‘grass roots’ of Internet use in the region. This approach takes the focus away from the cosmopolitan elite, who are assumed to be the technology’s most faithful patrons. In general, the data gathered for this case study suggest that individuals who use Internet cafés as their main source for access don’t have a computer and Internet access at home. If they are employed (many are not) and have access at work, they are not high enough on the hierarchy to be able to use the technology freely (for personal use). Moreover, many Internet café users do not use the technology in their work environments (carpenters, sales people in small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), tea boys, students, customer service representatives, secretaries, housewives), nor do they typically have any formal training in using computers.

Internet café users in Jordan and Egypt tend to have learned to use the technology in an Internet café, and they tend to be taught to use the tool by a family member or a friend. In most cases, these café users have subsequently taught a friend, family or community member to use the Internet, thus demonstrating a form of civic engagement whereby knowledge once attained is shared with others through informal networks. Moreover, many became Internet users to reduce the costs and increase the likelihood of staying in touch with friends and family members, especially when individuals in their kin and care networks are abroad. Many Internet café users in Jordan and Egypt are not educated beyond the high school level, and most are not online to transact business. Most are not comfortable using English, and surf websites or chat mainly in Arabic. According to the participants, the most intense draw of the technology is its ability to transport them to places they could not go otherwise. As examined below, the technology is celebrated by Internet café users in Jordan and Egypt because it enables them to act more freely, in conversations, and in building networks beyond carefully circumscribed boundaries, which govern the practice of everyday life beyond cyberspace.

One 24 year old female Internet café user from Jordan epitomized the region’s enthusiasm for the technology when she observes, ‘it’s the best thing that ever happened to me’ (Interview, Jordan Internet café, March, 2004).

Ultimately, the goal of this study is to see if Internet cafés in the region contribute to any kind of significant political change in the face of authoritarian control. Scholars of Middle Eastern studies have theorized, with scant empirical evidence, that the power of the web will enable citizens in the region to carve out more participatory political climates and freer flows of information among citizens and global civil society.¹⁶ This study of Internet café users in Jordan and Egypt builds upon these earlier works and illustrates the emergence of a civic culture in the region. From engaging a global cyber public in political debate to building networks of influence and opportunity beyond one’s structural position (defined by nation, tribe, religion, class, gender) Internet access is linking communities of people regionally who are becoming accustomed to having an opinion, who are increasingly comfortable

in making demands, who are growing accustomed to exercising agency to create change in their circumstances, and who are experimenting with other ways of being heard and seen in politics. All of these forms of experimentation illustrate ways in which the Internet precipitates civic culture in unexpected locations.

Given intense efforts on behalf of the Middle Eastern state and its security apparatus to censor and police Internet use within its borders, a caveat is required. Any use of the Internet to openly oppose the state is often punished by imprisonment. Access to oppositional websites, terrorist use of the Internet to network for attacks; these are the kinds of activities the states in the region are trying to police. Any activity which might alter the status quo, such as women’s activism for full political, social and economic enfranchisement in Saudi Arabia, the Bahraini freedom movement, and Islamist opposition movements in Tunisia, these would all be examples of the kinds of activities states in the region hope to inhibit through the filtering of information online. Pornography and the protection of Islamic values is often the explanation given for filtering. Analysts such as those affiliated with Reporters without Borders and the Open Net Initiative, have suggested that the net is often cast wider than stated, suggesting that deterring political activism designed to threaten the status quo is also a desired target of filtering regimes. We also know that the Internet was designed to interpret censorship as damage and route around it, so any filtering techniques are bound to be fallible.

This article studies a different phenomenon than overt or covert activism for immediate political and social change, the kind that usually gets one arrested. Instead, it studies the everyday informational lives of typical Arab citizens. These citizens’ Internet practices are seemingly benign in the state’s eyes, but if one looks closely, they just might contain the slow growing seeds of significant transformations by shaping the masses into more information aware global netizens. Internet café users in the Arab World, as analyzed below, seem to form a loosely defined counter-public in Nancy Fraser’s sense. Their activities online, form ‘parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs.’

How these emerging counter-publics will shape Arab politics in the future remains an issue to watch and at which to wonder.

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1. Boundary crossing and the (cyber) politics of gender

One form of Internet-enabled political maneuver in the Arab World is the attempt to use the technology to circumvent and transgress gender boundaries. For example, a recent study of the impact of the Internet in Saudi Arabia observes, ‘Saudis are poised on the edge of a significant new social landscape,’ because ‘new forms of private communication, like electronic mail and chat, but also online public discussion areas … for the first time enable communication between males and females in this gender-segregated society.’ \(^{18}\) Recent studies of the Internet in Kuwait support Saggaf’s findings, suggesting that in the conservative Gulf, it is the politics of gender which are most easily transgressed and subverted online. \(^{19}\) As explored below, Internet café users in Jordan and Egypt also discuss the importance of the Internet for enhanced gender freedoms. For example, a 24 year old female Internet user from Zarqa (Jordan) observes,

> Through the Internet, I got to know many girls and made many good female friends in Amman and Madaba. I also made a relationship with a man that was my friend in chat. I became more open minded and less conservative since I started talking with people in chat. (Interview, Jordan Internet Café, March, 2004)

Similarly, a 21 year old single Muslim female from Jordan says of the Internet,

> It changed my character and I became more social and less reserved. My relationships with the opposite sex (males) became more relaxed. Before I used to feel shy. Chat teaches a person to be more relaxed and open with people, it’s great. (Interview, Jordan Internet Café, March, 2004)

In another narrative, a 21 year old single Muslim female from Zarqa, Jordan says the Internet promotes two kinds of boundary crossing, national, to engage a global community, and gender, to more openly interact with the opposite sex. She states,

> On the Internet, I talk to many people. I made many friends in other countries. It is really interesting to know how men think about girls and relationships. In chat they talk freely because they are behind a screen. (Interview, Jordan Internet Café, March, 2004)


Throughout the Internet café interviews, young people expressed their fascination with the Internet’s ability to promote open and free discussions and interactions with the opposite sex, both within and beyond their home countries. For example, a 28 year old Muslim female from Cairo observes:

I got to know my boyfriend on the net. He’s from Bahrain, a great guy and it was so simple and relaxed to get to know him behind a screen at first. When we met it was as if we have known each other ages ago. (Interview, Internet café, Cairo, May 2004)

Given strict social sanctions against crossing gender boundaries outside of marriage and the family, the Internet is widening the interactions and experiences of men and women in the Middle East and North Africa. Many of those who develop relationships online eventually arrange to meet in real life, thus demonstrating the direct link between online and offline encounters. Some of these young people who participate in cybercourtships end up getting married to people they meet online, often to individuals from another country, or from beyond their normal social networks. At least once a week while conducting this research I was told stories of cybercourtships ending in marriage. For others, this is just a way to gain a broader and more intimate understanding of the opinions, emotions, feelings, and views of the opposite sex, a relatively unexplored territory. Moreover, the protection of the screen gives individuals the opportunity to overcome inhibitions and fears, without violating the principles and values with which they were raised. As demonstrated above, learning to move more freely across gender boundaries in cyberspace enables some Internet users to be more confident and comfortable interacting within the public sphere. For many women, expressing themselves publicly, especially when males are present, is highly intimidating in a culture which discourages female outspokenness. Cyber-experimentation can be an important training ground for women and men to develop their public voice.

2. Developing political consciousness and broadening horizons

In Jordan and Egypt, a second example of the Internet’s transformative powers is demonstrated by the technology’s ability to enable the sharing of political ideas and opinions publicly, beyond face-to-face trust networks among family and friends. For example, one 27 year old female Internet café user from Cairo observes,

I love the Internet. It has made a huge difference in my life. It is a world of its own, and it has its own particular charms including abundant information, the chance to know people from all over the world, having all kinds of discussions from politics to social issues to religious debates … It is interesting to chat and to make friends. I like talking to foreigners. I am not that keen on the closed Arab mentality. I like people who are
themselves in chat … no masks. In person they have to put on masks. (Interview, Cairo Internet Café, May, 2004)

Similarly, a 21 year old female from Cairo observes,

The net has surely changed my life. I like to read and to get info about different topics and … I like to also know in detail about news from events in the Arab world, and we discuss them in chat forums. The net is a great invention to get to know new people and exchange opinions. (Interview, Cairo Internet Café, May, 2004)

Reiterating once again, the way in which the Internet supports new forms of public deliberation, a 28 year old Muslim female from Cairo observes,

The Internet is a beautiful, great world of its own. I don’t feel the time passing while surfing or chatting. It's great for info and for making friends all over the world, having discussions, even arguments, but in good faith. (Interview, Cairo Internet café, May 2004)

In Jordan, these same sentiments were expressed. For example, a 30 year old male from Zarqa observes, ‘online I relax and enjoy my time, talking to people in other countries, exchanging ideas, and contacting relatives abroad’ (Interview, Jordan Internet café, March, 2004). Whereas communication face to face is often not relaxing, given the strict rules of modesty in public engagement, online communication flows more freely, giving the user an unprecedented opportunity to learn about others’ opinions, at the same time that they develop their own. For example, a 25 year old Muslim female from Jordan with a high school education observes,

The Internet has made a great difference in my life. I chat with people in other Arab countries, I get to know their traditions and it is fun to make friends. I met my best friend online. She is from Syria. (Interview, Jordan Internet café, February 2004)

Echoing this same sentiment, a 17 year old Muslim female from Cairo observes,

The Internet has changed my life. I made friends in the Gulf, Syria, and some foreign friendships in Spain and Greece. I enjoy discussing cultural things and our differences. I realized that there is a lot more to people and life than what I used to know. I hope one day to be able to travel and see how others live. Their society seems different and they have more freedom and choices. (Interview, Cairo Internet café, May, 2005)

Just knowing that other societies are organized in such a way as to enable their citizens a greater range of freedoms and choices can be an important trigger to demands for change in one’s own society. We saw this happen in the demise of the former Soviet Union, and in other once tightly controlled
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information environments.\textsuperscript{20} Repeatedly, Internet café users in Jordan and Egypt celebrate the tool’s ability to give them new opportunities to develop their knowledge and opinions of politics and social issues, cultural differences and identities, especially on those subjects which might be taboo in face to face interactions. Yeslam al-Saggaf explores the social and cultural constraints on public interactions in his study of Saudi Internet communities. He explains that in face to face settings, the Quran and local culture’s celebration of shyness and modesty inhibit open and frank communication. He notes, ‘Shyness (being reserved) is an important characteristic that people should uphold. Shyness in women is even more stressed than in men.’\textsuperscript{21} He explains, ‘Shyness is an attitude by which individuals show that they are decent and modest particularly in their language and appearance.’\textsuperscript{22} In terms of communication, this modesty means that ideally, people ‘should not be too outgoing, should not be confrontational, and should not talk about things that may cause embarrassment to themselves or others.’\textsuperscript{23}

With these strict rules on modesty governing offline communication, it is easy to understand the magnetism of the Internet. The tool is celebrated for its liberation of citizens from strict rules of modesty—thus giving users the freedom to be confrontational, to argue (but in good faith), to be outspoken, without paying the costs for such violations in real life. This ability to share and develop opinions, to extend social networks, and to grow in one’s political consciousness, and commitment to engaging in world and Arab affairs represents one of the most powerful political effects of the web. Whether by liberating users from strict social constraints on open and honest communication, or by opening users’ eyes to the traditions and cultures of societies different from their own; we have seen demonstrated in the narratives above, that such experiences have direct spill over effects on offline behavior. With these lessons gained online, Internet users become less shy, more confident, better informed, in their offline environments.

It is possible that this enhanced commitment to expressing themselves openly will have direct spill over effects on the practice of politics. The fact that expanded Internet access has been accompanied by unprecedented public outspokenness in politics suggests that the two are mutually reinforcing. We have seen such links expressed quite clearly in mass public demonstrations against Syrian troops in Lebanon, the recent campaign to award women their full political rights in Kuwait, and the spread of the Kifaya (‘enough’ in Arabic) movement from Palestine, to Lebanon, to Egypt where in the latter case, a growing public is pressing for electoral reform whereby the state will agree to hold open, multi-party elections for the presidency. Whether or not this growing public outspokenness can be linked directly with Internet use is

\textsuperscript{21} Al-Saggaf, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
difficult to say, but given the testimony of Internet users outlined above, one can easily see this trend as reinforced, if not inspired by what goes on in cyber experimentation.

3. Enhancing life chances and personal skills

In the Arab World, the Internet, in addition to creating more outspoken citizens, is also expanding knowledge and social capital. One way the technology expands knowledge is by providing access to news and information. For example, one 38 year old married Muslim female from Zarqa, Jordan, says the Internet, ‘gives her greater access to more news’ (Interview, Jordan Internet café, February 2004). Similarly, an Internet café manager in Zarqa claims that the Internet, ‘has given people access to unlimited information about everything for study or business or news, especially news that is not covered well on TV or radio’ (Interview, Jordan Internet café, January, 2004). The net effect of this wider access to uncensored information, according to a Jordanian Internet café manager, is that ‘the Internet educates people, adds to their general knowledge and information.’ The interviews also highlight more specific forms of knowledge acquisition. For example, an Internet café manager in Zarqa observes of his 200-300 customers per week, ‘their use of the net improves their English’ (Interview Jordan Internet café, March, 2004). This perspective is supported by an 18 year old female Muslim high school student from Zarqa who observes, ‘The Internet improved my English language’ (Interview, Jordan Internet café, March 2004). An 18 year old Muslim male from Jordan agrees. He claims, ‘The Internet benefited me in using and advancing my English language from chatting’ (Interview, Jordan Internet café, March, 2004).

In Cairo, Internet users as well celebrate the tool’s ability to improve their English. For example, a 22 year old Christian male explains,

I have a good time on the net. I enjoy every minute. It helps me greatly with my research papers and for any info for my hobbies and interests. My English has improved a great deal since I started chatting with foreigners. I learned many new words, good and bad. It’s better than any language center!! (Interview, Cairo Internet café, May 2004)

A recent study of youth employability explained that having knowledge of English and computer use promotes job placement, as well as job status. If this is true, then honing these skills in Internet cafés can advance the social status and employment opportunities for youths who may be denied such skills previously, because they were only afforded government education where foreign language and IT curricula are weak.

In addition to enhancing their knowledge capital in Internet cafés, Jordanians and Egyptians are also using the technology to network for better jobs. An advertisement by the region’s largest job placement firm Bayt.com invites clients to ‘get freedom; get the job you deserve.’ The call to action is delivered visually by a demanding boss with a Hitler-like moustache. The caption reads, ‘Managing Dictator?: Time to Revolt.’ A visit to the Bayt.com website suggests that the service targets the region’s white collar labor pool, but the Internet café surveys indicate that even middle and lower class citizens are networking online to improve their job prospects.

Whereas if you try to overthrow the government using the powers of the net, you are likely to end up in prison (as is the case for several cyber-dissidents in Tunisia, Syria, Bahrain, Iran and Egypt), if it is just your manager you are trying to subvert, the Internet is promoted in local public culture as a perfect vehicle. While it is not likely for a street sweeper, a house maid, or a garbage collector to be able to change his or her life circumstances via such services as www.bayt.com, it is possible that young, possibly unemployed tech-savvy citizens will be able to improve their professional lives through such tools. The appropriation of political language of revolt and revolution, combined with a heavy dose of personal agency, symbolizes the kinds of transformations imagined locally via the technology.

In addition to online job placement services such as Bayt.com and Career Egypt.com, Internet users in the region are also leveraging their expanded social networks to try to find a way out of discouraging life circumstances. For example, a 35 year old Muslim male from Egypt observes,

I made many new friendships in Arab and foreign countries and a foreign female friend came and visited me. It was great to meet her in person. We are close friends and she is trying to help me find a job abroad and have the chance to travel out of Egypt. You know, the economy here is getting worse. Salaries are low. What chance does a person have for a good life? The net is a door to opportunities and hopes. (Interview, Cairo Internet café, May 2004)

Likewise, an unemployed 27 year old Muslim male from Cairo explains,

The Internet has changed my life a great deal. It keeps me busy and fills the loads of free time that I have now recently being without a job. It’s a way to meet new people, express oneself without drawbacks. One can express one’s thoughts and opinions freely. It helps me look for jobs everywhere. It’s a gate to an unlimited world of socializing, job opportunities, and fun. I discovered and learned many things from the net. It educates people. (Interview, Cairo Internet café, May 2004)

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So, whether by learning to type in English and Arabic, improving one’s English, networking to find a job, or to travel, the Internet is narrowing what Her Majesty Queen Rania of Jordan calls ‘the hope gap.’

Conclusion

The persistence of state attempts to police cyberspace, to publicly punish cyber dissidents who go too far with their new freedoms of expression, and to filter the web, give pause to optimism and temper expectations for institutionalizing political change in the region. But one cannot help but think that the state is ultimately fighting a losing battle. The global pressure to join the knowledge economy means that states in the region can no longer afford to keep their publics digitally muzzled and blindfolded. Future economic opportunities in the region will be built upon the backs of entrepreneurs, and agents bent upon creating change through and with digital technologies. And in part, such changes will be constructed out of the voices and visions of those trained (even those self-taught in an Internet café) to use digital technologies in the pursuit of economic and personal growth. Just as in the past it has proven difficult to liberalize economically without democratizing, in the same way, it is hard to sustain freedoms to be creative and entrepreneurial digitally speaking, while at the same time, keeping these same concepts and tools from being used to re-engineer political and social life, from the family, to the community, to the state. As A. Richard Norton has observed,

Programs of liberalization are not easily contained: as press controls are loosened, demands for accountability emerge. Controls on associational life may be selectively lifted. But, even so, the right to organize freely is hard to contain.

As explored in this article, Internet experimentation can help to foster a political consciousness; boundary transgressions which can bring citizens into deliberations with people beyond their normal social networks, and acquisitions of knowledge and experience. Throughout the narratives of Internet café users interviewed for this study, clear spill over effects are identified as online experimentation helps to shape the practice of everyday life, whether making people more open minded, more confident, better informed, more secure in their opinions, or more outspoken. The tides of these changes in outlook and behavior are unlikely to be controlled fully by pre-existing power structures such as the state, the neighborhood, the family.

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27 This phrase was used by her Majesty during a speech she delivered (visibly pregnant) to launch Intel’s Computer Clubhouse in Hashim al-Shamali neighborhood, Amman, Jordan November 29th, 2004, which the author attended. While the Queen’s poise and beauty were truly impressive, what I found most significant was the fact that she drives her own vehicle; clearly symbolic of the kinds of opportunities the Kingdom is attempting to carve out for women to be independent, publicly engaged and outspoken.

28 Norton at n. 10, p. 37.
The findings of this article suggest that Dale Eickelman was correct when he observed,

> Whether Arab states like it or not, increasing levels of education, greater ease of travel, and the rise of new communications media are turning the Arab street into a public sphere in which greater numbers of people, not just a political and economic elite, will have a say in governance and public issues.  

One cannot help but wonder if increasing freedoms of expression and association online are somehow linked with overt public demands for reform. The fact that public demands for reform are often orchestrated through the active use of new media technologies such as mobile phones and the Internet, gives reason to pay closer attention to emerging forms of democratic experimentation supported by Internet cafés throughout the region.

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