A power struggle between state governments and civil society lies at the heart of current dynamics in the Arab world, as governments feel increasingly threatened by what they perceive as civil society organizations slipping out of their control. It was this issue that caused the ‘Forum for the Future’ conference held in November 2005 to advance political, social, and economic reform in the Broader Middle East and North Africa region to end without agreement on a final document.  

And to a considerable extent this new dynamics is shaped by new media – satellite television, mobile phones, the Internet. Not surprisingly, media were the focus of the Arab Thought Forum’s annual meeting in December 2005. New media are helping to give a more influential voice to civil society, while governments are desperately trying to barricade the door – as aptly illustrated by the Lebanese-Swiss cartoonist Chappatte. But in their attempts to barricade the door to genuine reforms, they do not look very confident – contrary to many voices expressed on the new media who despite their critique of ongoing repression of these media themselves have begun to express a deep-seated optimism in the eventual impact they will have. This optimism has been more pronounced in 2005 than in the five years before – a year that brought not only elections in several countries across the region that were freer than many earlier ones, but also the emergence in earnest of Arab blogging, and a reinvigoration of secular websites working for greater political transparency, sites that for the first time appeared to have a sufficient audience to begin to have an impact on the broader public both nationally and internationally.

This chapter is a revision of the author’s ‘The Internet in the Arab world: Playground for political liberalisation’, International Politics and Society, 3/2005, pp. 78-96. We are grateful to IPS for permission to use the article.

1 See ‘Mideast reform forum ends in confusion’, The Daily Star, 14 November.
Still, the situation is far from being unambiguous. Two issues bracketed debates on the public impact of Internet use in the Arab world in 2005: the ‘Arab spring’ discovered by American media in March, and the focus on censorship that surrounded the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Tunis in November. The year began with high hopes for democratic change in the region, precipitated by the new media’s undermining of governments’ hegemonic control over the flow of information. It ended on a much more subdued note, with Tunisian authorities turning a deaf ear to international criticism over their heavy-handed handling of autonomous civil society organisations and critical journalism both on- and offline. In-between, we witnessed the break-through of blogging as a serious part of the Arabic mediascape, and the first arrests of Arab bloggers in Libya, Iraq, and Egypt. This alternation between hope and frustration is symptomatic for the mood around Arabic cyberspace. But is the year’s chronology also indicative of the overall development regarding the impact of Arab Internet use? Or is it perhaps rather a question of whether the glass is half-full or half-empty?

The Internet – in the 1990s often extolled as a harbinger of democratic change – has not caused autocratic regimes in the Middle East to stand down. Political change has certainly occurred, but how sincere and deep it is remains open to question. Syrian troops were withdrawn from Lebanon, but Syrian intelligence and political influence remains strong. Iraqis voted twice, but their major concern continues to be security, not democracy. The first-ever real elections were held in Saudi-Arabia, and voters in Egyptian presidential and parliamentary elections had a greater choice than at any previous time since 1952. But in both countries, low voter turnout signalled a belief based on experience: that the elections would only have a very limited impact on real policy making. In the Sudan, a peace agreement ended a civil war that had overshadowed most of the post-independence period; but the new national government continues to be dominated by entrenched power elites, mirroring similar reconfigurations in Syria and Morocco in previous years. In short, an ‘orange revolution’ does not appear in sight in the Middle East.

Censorship unable to curtail expanding freedoms

Censorship is one of the problems users in the region are fighting with, although not all countries exercise it to the same degree. Of the fifteen ‘enemies of the Internet’ pointed out by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) in November 2005 as giving cause for particular concern due to their regulation of net use, four lie in the Arab world: Libya, Saudi-Arabia, Syria, and

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5 Libyan Abd al-Raziq al-Mansuri was detained in January 2005 after publishing articles on the UK-based, blog/news site akhbar-libya.com, and sentenced in November to one and a half years in prison (http://committeetoprotectbloggers.civiblog.org/blog/Libya). Iraqi engineering student and blogger Khalid Jarrar recounts his abduction by Iraqi intelligence service and subsequent ordeal at http://secretsinbaghdad.blogspot.com/2005_07_01_secretsinbaghdad_archive.html -- he had been charged with visiting the well-known Iraqi blog raedinthemiddle.blogspot.com. Egyptian Abdolkarim Nabil Seliman, who had been attacking Islamic fundamentalists in very strong terms on his blog (http://karam903.blogspot.com) was arrested on 26 October 2005, ostensibly to protect him from an Islamist attack; he was released 18 days later. On 5 December 2005, two days before the last round of the parliamentary elections, Egyptian state security arrested Ahmed Abdallah, editor of the Islamist Baladynet.net. Released on 22, he is awaiting trial on hitherto unpublished charges (‘Malaff i’tiqal al-Shaykh Abu Islam Ahmad ‘Abd Allah’, http://www.baladynet.net/abuislam/jail.htm; Reporters Sans Frontières, ‘Le directeur d’un site Internet remis en liberté après deux semaines de détention’, 26 December 2005, http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=15840).
Methods and policies differ considerably. Filtering and blocking of certain sites deemed inappropriate for moral or political reasons is common in Libya, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, the UAE, and Yemen. Often, all Internet traffic is routed through a single provider or proxy system controlled by state authorities. On such a server, authorities often employ the commercial, US-produced SmartFilter content software to restrict their citizen’s access to the net. SmartFilter – which is also widely used in US companies and educational institutions – offers a constantly updated control list of millions of web pages in more than sixty languages, organized into over seventy categories ‘for flexible policy enforcement options.’ This allows not only to filter, but also to monitor web use from behind proxy servers. Saudi Arabia has been most open about its access restrictions, which are directed by a special ‘security committee’ chaired by the Ministry of Interior and implemented by the Internet Services Unit (ISU) of the King Abdulaziz City for Science & Technology in Riyadh. Only after authorities were confident enough to be guaranteed a high level of technical control over Internet use did they open up public access to the net – in 1999, over three years later than most other states of the region. Stated Saudi policy is that ‘all sites that contain content in violation of Islamic tradition or national regulations shall be blocked.’ Research conducted by the OpenNet Initiative (ONI) has demonstrated that filtering in Saudi Arabia most effectively focuses on pornography and sexually explicit material, and that filtering in this category has strengthened over the years. Sites promoting gambling, drug use, or conversion to Christianity are actively targeted as well, as are tools to circumvent filtering (alternative web proxy servers, encryption tools). Filtering is much less strict regarding alcohol, gay/lesbian issues, women’s rights, and political opposition. Generally, the primacy of ‘moral’ issues over political concerns is important to note, as it helps to explain the considerable popular support that filtering enjoys in the Kingdom. Users can participate in ‘keeping the net clean’ by submitting requests to ban objectionable, but hitherto accessible sites or alternatively, to unblock site mistakenly blocked by the ISU.

A similar situation obtains in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the region’s most wired country with one third of the population online. The hitherto only Internet Service Provider (ISP) there, the largely state-owned Etisalat, aims to block sites ‘inconsistent with the political, moral, and religious values of the United Arab Emirates,’ according to the message users get when trying to access a blocked site. In 2002, sixty percent of the country’s domestic subscribers reportedly favoured retaining filtering, mostly to protect family members from offensive material. Like Saudi Arabia, the UAE employs SmartFilter

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7 Produced by Secure Computing (http://www.securecomputing.com). In the region, Iran is also known to use SmartFilter. Side effects of using commercial software from the US are overblocking (due to wrong categorization) and a tendency for English-language filters to be more comprehensive than those in other languages – which means, for example, that sites on religious conversion are not available in Saudi Arabia in English, but can be accessed in Arabic.
9 The monopoly of Etisalat (sarcastically called, ‘Etishite’ by its critics) is set to be replaced by a ‘duopoly’ in 2006, when a new, 40 per cent state owned company is expected to be licensed (‘What will Etisalat’s lost monopoly mean?’, AME Info, 8 May 2005). Procrastination over the ending of Etisalat’s monopoly was criticized in the blog ‘Sorry Dubai’ in December 2005 – a few days later, the blog disappeared off the web, allegedly after having been blocked by Etisalat (‘Dubai blog blocked’, AME Info, 8 December 2005).
extensively to block material related to pornography, gambling, religious conversion, and circumvention tools such as anonymizers or translation sites. Unlike Saudi Arabia, the UAE also blocks the entire Israeli top level domain (.il) – but not Israeli sites registered elsewhere. Attempts are also made to block gay/lesbian sites, dating sites in English (but not in Arabic), and sites critical of Islam. Political blocking – other than that of the Israel domain – is very limited, however. Specifically targeted is only the Arab-American ‘Arab Times’ (http://www.arabtimes.com), which presents itself as an electronic ‘Hyde Park’ where contributors can voice their often highly critical opinions uncensored, and which until at least 2003 proudly claimed to be ‘the only newspaper forbidden in all Arab countries.’

Contrary to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, political blocking remains rather aggressive in Tunisia, which also employs the SmartFilter software. In addition to pornography and circumvention tools, Tunisia focuses on preventing access to sites on political opposition and human rights criticism of Tunisia’s practices. Analyzing the pattern of Tunisia’s online censorship, Human Rights Watch concluded that ‘its policy has been guided less by a fear of terrorism or incitement to violence [a reason often given to justify censorship] than by a fear of peaceful internal dissent.’ Filtering was eased somewhat in the run-up to the second World Summit on the Information Society held in Tunis in November 2005, with many sites previously blocked becoming available again, but it remains to be seen how durable this is.

Political control of Internet use in Tunisia relies not only on filtering (which is carried out at the network backbone to encompass all ISPs), but also on heavy pressure through the country’s legal system. Internet cafés are required to monitor customer access (which they do by placing screens in such a way that they can be monitored by staff, and/or by asking customers to register their identity card numbers – both methods well-known from other countries as well). While details of the Internet regime are not made transparent (contrary to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Tunisian users are only served a generic failure page when trying to access blocked sites), the public is made clearly aware that their Internet use is being observed by the authorities and can be used against them in court. Thus, Tunisia is home to the first ‘martyr of cyber-dissidence,’ publisher of a webzine critical of the regime (www.tunezine.com), who was arrested and sentenced to 28 months in prison in 2002 for ‘disseminating false information’ and ‘stealing Internet services’. Released after international pressure in November 2003, Yahyaoui stopped publishing. Allegedly exhausted from police harassment, he died of a heart attack in March 2005, aged 36. Currently, the most widely publicized case is that of a group of young men from Zarzis in southern Tunisia who were sentenced in 2004 to long prison terms on charge of plotting terrorist attacks. The men claim to have been tortured into confessing, but the courts refused to investigate these allegations. Among the evidence produced by prosecution were printouts from websites with

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11 In July 2005, the number of Internet users in Tunisia was estimated at 905,000 (http://www.ati.nat.tn/stats/).
15 Zarvan: False Freedom, pp 109-10. Zouhair was the nephew of former judge Mokhtar Yahyaoui, president of the Centre de Tunis pour l’Indépendance de la Justice and one of Tunisia’s leading political dissidents. Mokhtar maintains a blog at http://yahyaoui.blogspot.com, opened in July 2001 with an open letter to the Tunisian President calling for respect of the independence of the judiciary.
information on jihad, weapons and explosives, fraud etc., allegedly confiscated from the defendants. In another case, also in 2004, thirteen youths were convicted for similar offences, partly based on charges of having downloaded inflammatory material from the Internet. In 2005, human rights activist Mohamed Abbou was arrested and sentenced to three and a half years in prison after publishing an article critical of President Ben Ali on the banned news site tunisnews.com (described by many as the most popular source of online news in Tunisia despite the ban).\(^\text{16}\) Taken together, this situation has earned Tunisia the reputation of one of the harshest Internet regimes in the Arab world. That the Tunisian government should have succeeded to have the UN Information Summit held in a country with such restrictions on the freedom of information gave cause for massive criticism among both local and international commentators.

Like in Tunisia, Syrian authorities have been very weary of the Internet’s potential for free communication. When the country’s current president, Bashshar al-Asad, followed his father on the ‘throne’ in 2000, he had been the focus of considerable hope to bring about a liberalisation of the political system, including the Internet – after all, he was the founder of the Syrian Computer Society (SCS). And true enough, Internet access was opened to the public that same year – Syria was among the last Arab countries to do so. But soon, it became clear that authorities were implementing one of the most debilitating filtering systems in the Arab world, extensively blocking not only opposition and political information sites (including some of the most well-known international Arabic publications such as al-Hayat, Elaph, Islam Online, al-Quds al-Arabi, or the Arab Times, as well as anonymizers and circumvention tools, but interfering with the very set-up of the Internet by blocking FTP uploads (used to upload websites), SSH (used to encrypt communication), or SMTP (used to send e-mail) via all but government-controlled servers. ‘It’s not the Internet, it’s the “Enter-not,”’ a Syrian student summed up his experience.\(^\text{17}\) Syria is also among the leading Arab nations as far as the detention of citizens in connection with Internet-related charges is concerned.\(^\text{18}\) Citizens have been held without charge for months or jailed for years for forwarding to friends political jokes or news clippings critical of the government and for emailing information documenting and criticizing Syrian policies to Arab and international media. A Kurdish-Syrian journalism student, Mas’ud Hamid, was awarded the Prix Reporters sans frontières - Fondation de France 2005 in the category ‘cyberdissident.’ He was one of the few journalists who managed to make public, via the Internet, photographs of police violence against a demonstration of Kurdish children in 2003. Arrested a month later during university exams – clearly designed to intimidate his fellow future journalists – he was held in solitary confinement for a year and allegedly badly tortured before being tried and sentenced to three years in prison.\(^\text{19}\)

By early November 2005, it was reported that Syria had partially opened up previously restricted services such as chatting, FTP, SSH, or SMTP. This new policy followed the start of operations of Syria’s first local private ISP (aya.sy) in August 2005. Initially, Aya had applied the same restrictions as the two government-affiliated providers (ste.net.sy and ssc-
net.org), but by early November, many of these limitations were lifted. Customers of SCS-Net also benefited from a limited opening. Observers are still speculating about the motivations; some attribute the move merely to improved tools of control available to the security organs. Others believe that site blocking in Syria is more than else a factor of blackmail and corruption. These developments come as the government is preparing a new media law that should end the current legal vacuum with regard to official Internet policy, but which proposes some rather restrictive conditions on Internet publishing. Caution is in place given previous dashed expectations.

In other states such as Bahrain, Qatar, or Jordan, filtering is much less restrictive, mostly focussing on a few political opposition sites and some pornographic sites. These efforts are largely symbolic as alternative sites are readily accessible; but even so, freedom of information remains volatile. Thus, in Bahrain authorities continue to target individual opposition sites on and off without necessarily sustaining a clear political line. A campaign announced in April 2005 to have all Bahraini websites registered was not vigorously pursued. But over the years, authorities made repeated efforts to prevent access to various opposition sites. Most recently, in mid-November 2005, around forty sites were blocked without warning. Among the most prominent sites targeted is Multaqa al-Bahrain (bahrainonline.org), a popular discussion forum established in 1999 that is used by the country’s Shiite opposition to organize protests and evade the police. First blocked in 2002, the site was blocked again in early 2005, after a UN report critical of the government’s discrimination against the Shiite majority had been posted on the forum. Bahraini authorities also arrested its founder, 27-year old Ali Abdul Imam, and two website technicians. The three were released two weeks later, but charges continue to hang over their heads. On the other hand, the government unblocked the Voice of Bahrain (www.vob.org), mouthpiece of the London-based Islamist Shiite opposition Bahrain Freedom Movement / Harakat Ahrar al-Bahrain al-Islamiyya. And Bahrainis continue to post to sites such as bahrainonline.com from within the country, demonstrating the limited effect filtering has.

The effect and effectiveness of censorship is mixed. It can be bypassed fairly easily by the determined, the more technology-savvy or those with the means to connect through a provider in a neighbouring country. In connexion with well-publicized crackdowns, however, it works

20 By early January 2006, SMTP on the most common port 25 was blocked again by SCS-Net, but alternative ports as well as tunnelling through SSL was still possible.
22 al-Ayham Saleh & George Kadar, ‘Siyyasa jaadita li-hajb al-mawaqi’ wa’l-khidamat ‘ala al-Internet al-Suriyya’, 6 November 2005 (http://www.alayham.com/modules/news/article.php?storyid=391). Since then, new private ISPs are beginning to emerge. In mid-November, the Computer Engineering Company started its own service (cec.sy), advertising ‘family safe’ computing. Tarassul.sy is next in line. The new providers are resellers to Syrian Telecom’s digital Public Data Network launched in March 2005, and thus easily subject to state control of passing traffic. Satellite downstream connections, which cannot be monitored so easily, are offered by Best Italia since January 2005, and SCS and another provider have obtained licenses for similar services, but satellite links are so expensive as to be an option primarily for embassies and large companies.
by inducing self-censorship in activists and by preventing access to banned sites for the general population. For the majority, cost is still another factor limiting the use of the net. In many countries (e.g. Morocco, Syria, Sudan, Yemen), access was so expensive for many years that effective Internet use was restricted to a tiny elite, although this is beginning to change.

Even countries where largely unfiltered access has long been available (Algeria, Egypt, Iraq since 2003, Kuwait, Morocco, and Sudan) are not immune to censorship. On 21 November 2005, Morocco blocked the main Polisario sites (arso.org, spsrasd.info, cahiersdusahara.com, and wsahara.net) and followed this up swiftly with blocking anonymizer.com after it had been recommended as a circumvention tool.24 Egypt partially blocked one of the sites of the opposition Muslim Brotherhood, the strongest rival to the regime in the country’s parliamentary elections (http://www.ikhwanonline.com), as well as the online edition of the Labour Party’s banned biweekly, al-Sha’b (http://www.alshaab.com). Mirror sites such as http://www.ikhwanonline.org continued to be accessible, however, leading even Human Rights Watch to conclude that criticism of government policies and of individual officials generally can be freely expressed online in terms not permitted in print.25

Overall, while censorship remains an issue of great concern, governments have not been able to silence the expression of dissent on the net and to prevent the increasing use of technology to strengthen communication and coordination among opposition and civil society activists. Banning access to certain sites serves to channel the mass of average users away from unwanted content; it does not hinder those who really want to communicate dissent since they can find ways to contour official control with relative ease. The fear of reprisals may exist, but on the other hand, as one human rights lawyer in the Sudan put it in an interview with this author, ‘the government knows what we think anyhow, so if they want to arrest us they do so whether or not we put our opinion out on the net, so we don’t let that restrain us.’ Syria, Tunisia and Saudi Arabia exercise the most heavy-handed control of Internet traffic in the region, but even – or perhaps especially – in these countries, the net has proven to be a vital factor in opening windows and expanding the dominion of what can be said in public. Zouhair Yahyaoui had ‘managed to open a breach,’ as his supporters said,26 and even the strongest detractors of the government admit that the ‘Internet is the major window for Tunisians in a context of total lack of freedom of press and information.’27 The Syrian writer Ammar Abdulhamid, founder of the Tharwa Project (www.tharwaproject.com, an initiative that seeks to raise awareness of the living conditions of minority groups in the Middle East under the slogan ‘Difference is Wealth’) wrote that despite the gloomy picture that still characterizes Syrian media, ‘there are indications that reform-minded members of the regime are willing to

24 Rachid Jankari, Morocco’s foremost blogger, was the first to report the blocking: ‘Censure des sites de Polisario au Maroc,’ 23 November 2005 (http://www.jankari.org/index.php?2005/11/23/595-censure-des-sites-de-polisario-au-maroc); the news then spread quickly in the blogging scene. See also RSF, ‘Le site anti-censure Anonymizer.com ajouté à la liste noire du Net marocain’, 20 December 2005 (http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=15808). Morocco had in 2001 blocked the site of the Islamist youth monthly Risalat al-Futuwwa, but unblocked the site in 2002 while banning the print edition of the paper. The online edition never really came alive, however, and remains dormant to this day.

25 Zarvan: False Freedom, p 34.


allow the voicing of limited dissent in state-owned outlets,’ apparently as an ‘extension of the regime’s tolerance of Internet-based initiatives’ – a policy that allows opposition figures to disseminate electronic bulletins even though public access to their websites may be blocked. Such liberalisation is reflected in print before the broadcast media. It has also been observed in Saudi Arabia where newspapers were allowed a growing margin to criticize local administration and speak out on local issues, first in the wake of the spread of satellite TV in the early 1990s, and then following the introduction of Internet services in 1999/2000. A few years into this development, we have witnessed local elections held in the country (10 February–21 April 2005), a phenomenon unthinkable a decade and a half ago, and hopes are running high that women – whose public rights or lack thereof increasingly are the subject of debate in the media – will be given the vote by 2009.

It is futile to debate whether such developments are more due to pressure from outside or from inside – a debate that for obvious political reasons rages heatedly in the Middle East. When the US government in 2003 first initiated the ‘Greater Middle East Initiative’ for the promotion of democracy in the region, many activists were concerned that their age-old call for political reform in their countries was being hijacked by a superpower that for the better part of the twentieth century had been known for supporting, in the name of stability, the very regimes that symbolized the stifling of democratic movements, and that therefore, the call for democracy was in danger of becoming stained even more than before as a submission to ‘Western’ ideas and Western hegemony. In the end, however, the view gained ground that whatever the US agenda may be, civil society should not get discouraged, but continue to intensify its efforts to lobby for genuine reform. Initiatives there are plenty, the will to expand the use of the Internet for educating the public is strong, international support for civil society development is forthcoming, and despite persistent efforts by states to monitor and curtail the free flow of information, they have not only been unable to suppress it, but in general have had to concede that their hegemony over communication is shrinking. The question now is: who actually has access to the Internet in the Arab world? And what do people do with the new medium?

Still limited reach – but among the young, the net is becoming a fact of life

By 2004, 6 per cent of the population in Arab countries were using the Internet – close to 17 million people. Since the fourth quarter of 2004, many Arabic websites have registered a clear, exponential growth in access numbers, a development linked to the increasing availability of broadband connections in Arab states. For the end of 2005, around 25 million Arab users, or 8 per cent of the population, had been predicted back in 2002. In the light of current growth rates, this forecast seems entirely realistic, and we may expect at least 11 percent of the Arab population to be online by the end of 2006.

29 Data derived from International Telecommunications Union (ITU), ‘Internet indicators: Hosts, users and number of PCs – 2004’ (http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics). The market information company TNS has given much higher estimates, but their data collection methods are not transparent. In 2004, they claimed Internet penetration in the UAE to be 36% (ITU: 32%), Lebanon 28% (ITU: 17%), Kuwait 26% (ITU: 24%), Jordan 26% (ITU: 11%), Saudi Arabia 17% (ITU: 6%), Syria 14% (ITU: 4%), Morocco 9% (ITU: 12%) (‘Survey research over the Internet’, AME Info, 19 September 2004).
30 ‘Internet penetration in the Arab world’, Madar Research Journal 0 (October 2002).
Geographically, Egypt and Saudi Arabia have so far been the two countries contributing most to this growth. They make up over a third of all Arab Internet users, and use is expanding particularly fast in Egypt. The prominence of these countries, as well as the purchasing power of Gulf Arabs, very much shapes the content of what surfers of Arabic cyberspace are most likely to encounter.

Socially, the net has spread fastest in recent years among the young and among females. It is chiefly 20-30 year olds who use the net most avidly (their percentage among net users in 2003 was twice as high as their share of the total population); and those younger than 20 are the group that grows most rapidly. In the UAE, half of the 15-24 year olds were said to be connected in 2004. Women, who in 1998 allegedly constituted only 4 per cent of Arab net users, are meanwhile approaching the 50 per cent mark.

Reliable data on income structure and education of users are barely available. Regular use, however, entails costs that most members of the lower class find difficult to justify. Together with a less developed infrastructure in rural areas, this accounts for the fact that Internet use so far has remained strongest among urban, middle and upper class groups. Among the younger, educated elites, however, it increasingly is a fact of life. And while in the 1990s, the net was clearly limited to being a medium of communication of middle-aged professionals, it is today rapidly becoming a factor in the socialization of the young generation.

**Where do they want to go today?**

What do all these people do when they log onto the net? Patterns of popularity have remained relatively stable over the past six years for which statistics are available. In January 2006, these were the most popular Arabic sites on the Internet:

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31 By November 2005, Egypt reported 4.4 million users (6 per cent of the population) and Saudi-Arabia 2.54 million (11 per cent) (Information and Decision Support Center [IDSC, Cairo], ‘Ta’thir al-Internet ‘ala al-shabab fi Misr wa’l-‘alam al-‘Arabi: dirasa naqdiyya’, ed. ‘Ala’ al-Khawaga, November 2005, p 18). Morocco has also had high growth rates recently, due largely to the upgrading of the bandwidth infrastructure with simultaneous drop in prices that the country benefited from in 2004. By December 2005, the number of net users in Morocco was put at over 4 million – more than 13 per cent of the population (Rachid Jankari, ‘Les indicateurs d’internet au Maroc’, Menara, 15 December 2005, http://www.menara.ma/Infos/includes/detail.asp?article_id=10987&lmodule=Technologie). But Moroccan Internet space continues to be dominated by Francophone content, which means less interchange with Middle Eastern cyberspace.

32 48 per cent of Egyptian families that use the net spend up to 50 EGP [7 EUR] a month on access, roughly 7 per cent of average monthly income. 25 per cent spend between 50 and 100 EGP a month. For the lower spenders, this translates into as much as 50 hours from home or approximately 20 hours in an Internet café. 70 per cent of the youth surveyed access the net from home (IDSC, ‘Istitla’ ra’y al-usar hawl istikhdam al-shabab li’l-Internet’ and ‘Istitla’ ra’y al-shabab hawl istikhdam al-Internet’, 1 October 2005).

33 The ‘traffic rank’ in this table is taken from Alexa.com. Note that IslamOnline is not included here because its traffic rank of 534 in January 2006 is due to a considerable extent to the popularity of its English version. The relative position of its Arabic version in the Alexa Arabic directory has sunk from 10 in November 2003 to 22 in January 2006. Other sites with important non-Arabic content whose directory position justifies inclusion here are set in italics.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>URL</th>
<th>Established</th>
<th>Traffic Rank 03/11</th>
<th>Traffic Rank 05/05</th>
<th>Traffic Rank 06/01</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Google Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>The third Arabic interface page of the search engine Google (after google.ae and google.com.ly). 25% of requests are for images (on the international Google.com these account for 8%, on Google.ae for 32%, and on Google.com.ly for 15% (January 2006).</td>
<td>google.com.sa</td>
<td>Aug. 2004</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSN Arabia</td>
<td>Incarnation of the worldwide Microsoft Network portal site localized for users in the Arab world; in Arabic and English. Run by Microsoft together with LINKdotNET, Egypt’s largest Internet provider (over 40 per cent market share), produced in Cairo and Dubai (Dubai Internet City). Apart from the fact that it comes preinstalled as a home page on all Windows computers sold in the region, and the close intertwining of MSN with popular services such Microsoft Hotmail and Microsoft Messenger, the partnership with LINKdotNET contributed much to the success of MSN Arabia, which by July 2004 had over 4.5 million registered users.</td>
<td>arabia.msn.com</td>
<td>Sep. 2001</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>200^34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maktoob</td>
<td>The first web-based e-mail service that allowed the use of Arabic (in addition to English). Jordanian company. Became the most frequented Arabic website by 2000, perhaps earlier. 1 million registered users in 2001; 3.5 in November 2003; 4.3 in January 2006—a fifth of all users in the Arab world. Has added chatting, e-cards, news, polls, shopping, games and blogs to its offerings.</td>
<td>maktoob.com</td>
<td>Oct. 1998</td>
<td>1405</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>al-Jazeera</td>
<td>Internet edition of the Arab world’s most famous satellite TV station. News in Arabic and English. Streaming video and syndicating services were made paid services after initial pilot projects.</td>
<td>aljazeera.net</td>
<td>Aug. 1998</td>
<td>575</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>288^35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>al-Saha al-Arabiyya</td>
<td>One of the oldest (since April 1998) and best-known Arabic discussion forums, popular among all political persuasions, especially in the UAE and Saudi-Arabia.</td>
<td>alsaha.fares.net/alsaha.com</td>
<td>Nov. 1996</td>
<td>1519</td>
<td>352</td>
<td>303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Google.ac</td>
<td>Google’s first Arabic version.</td>
<td>google.ac</td>
<td>Dec. 2002</td>
<td>3145</td>
<td>473</td>
<td>375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kooora</td>
<td>Soccer portal.</td>
<td>kooora.com</td>
<td>Sep. 2002</td>
<td>&gt;20000</td>
<td>1007</td>
<td>391</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

^34 Traffic rank estimated here according to position in Alexa’s directory, since it is only measured there. In December 2005, MSN Arabia was the second most visited site from Saudi Arabia, after google.com and before google.com.sa.

^35 In January 2006, 8 per cent of traffic was drawn by english.aljazeera.net (May 2005: 10 per cent; November 2003: 25 per cent); traffic rank was adjusted accordingly.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>URL</th>
<th>Established</th>
<th>Traffic Rank 03/11</th>
<th>Traffic Rank 05/05</th>
<th>Traffic Rank 06/01</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hawaaworld</td>
<td>Portal for women, conventional outlook. Based in Saudi Arabia. By far most the popular service is the discussion forum (January 2006: 181,000 members; &gt;400,000 threads; &gt;5.4 million postings). To its popularity also visitors to the alternative address hawaaworld.net would need to be added.</td>
<td>hawaaworld.com</td>
<td>Sep. 2000</td>
<td>17874</td>
<td>781</td>
<td>453</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6arab.com</td>
<td>RealAudio files of popular Arabic music.</td>
<td>6arab.com</td>
<td>Apr. 1999</td>
<td>1538</td>
<td>589</td>
<td>481</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>al-Ahram</td>
<td>Internet version of the grand old lady of the Egyptian press and second largest Egyptian daily. Domain popularity is also caused by readers of, the English-language Al-Ahram Weekly and the French Al-Ahram Hebdo.</td>
<td>ahram.org.eg</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>1085</td>
<td>505</td>
<td>499</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tarab</td>
<td>Music portal.</td>
<td>6rb.com</td>
<td>Aug. 2002</td>
<td>4591</td>
<td>798</td>
<td>548</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mawqi‘ al-Ustadh Amr Khaled</td>
<td>Site of the pietistic preacher Amr Khaled, born in Egypt and living in London, who is especially popular among the young. With highly frequented discussion forums (drawing 36% of total traffic in January 2006; &gt;316,000 members, up from &gt;76,800 in November 2003). In 2003, 43% of visitors hailed from Egypt; 20% from Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and Jordan; 14% from North Africa; 10% from the Gulf; 5% from North America; 4% from Europe.</td>
<td>amrkhaled.net</td>
<td>Jan. 2002</td>
<td>4595</td>
<td>389</td>
<td>560</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vip600 – Iqla’-Soft</td>
<td>Arabic-language software guide; technical forums; Internet services. Based in Riyadh.</td>
<td>vip6.com</td>
<td>Jan. 2002</td>
<td>&gt;20000</td>
<td>1557</td>
<td>602</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swalif</td>
<td>High frequency discussion forums (2.5 million postings by January 2006; no membership numbers published). A search engine across so far 30 external forums adds to the site’s attractiveness.</td>
<td>swalif.net</td>
<td>Aug. 1999</td>
<td>6684</td>
<td>1283</td>
<td>610</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

36 http://www.amrkhaled.net/ar/amr/pollBooth.php?op=results&pollID=7, accessed on 23 December 2003 [no longer available]. In 2003, 41 per cent of 11,123 users said they had come to know the site via the free email service ForIslam.com, which offered 10MB of free web space at a time when MSN Hotmail and Yahoo! Mail were still at 4-6 MB). 34 per cent came via satellite TV ads, 15 per cent via friends, 8 per cent via Internet links, and 2 per cent via the press (pollID=10). The significance of ForIslam.com has since much decreased.
### Name Description URL Established Traffic Rank Traffic Rank Traffic Rank
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**Gawab** Web mail service (established in Egypt, but with customers world-wide). gawab.com Mar. 2000 2446 597 875

**Shabakat Oz** Kuwaiti portal: music, chat, clubs, pictures, software downloads. With discussion forums (>358,000 members, >5.8 million postings, >420,000 threads by Jan. 2006), where entertainment, music, Star Academy, ringtones, and greetings to friends are the most popular areas. ozq8.com July 2001 7827 1112 881

**Al-Gomhuria** Third-largest Egyptian daily. Sports pages are most popular online as in print. algomhuria.net.eg (2001?) 2921 1043 885

Data from other sources present a similar picture. For example, the Saudi censorship authorities release monthly statistics of the sites most frequently accessed from Saudi Arabia, in which many of the addresses listed above reappear. Among other sites, the most consistently popular in the Kingdom throughout 2002-2005 were Yahoo! (with Yahoo! Groups, chat, mail), Lycos.co.uk (private forums and home pages), Bawwabat al-Arab (arabsgate.com, a secular Saudi portal with the most highly frequented discussion forums in the Arab world, plus a variety of services), Zawgaty.com (matrimonials), Geocities (private forums and home pages), Eqla3.com (an anti-Islamist Saudi site offering a satirical perspective on events in the Arab world, with discussion forums not least on culture, society, and sports), The Times of India, Al-Watan (alwatan.com.sa, leading Saudi daily targeting a reform-oriented audience), Muntadayat Jawwal al-Arab (mobile4arab.com, forums on mobile phones), Mubasher.com.sa (real-time prices from the Saudi Stock Exchange), Muntada al-Shasha (alshashah.com, a financial discussion forum that has meanwhile been replaced by a host of other stock market forums) and Elaph.com (a liberal pan-Arab electronic newspaper).37

The fact that women and young people constitute an ever more important part of net users is clearly reflected in the growth of traffic of sites serving their interests. Between 2003 and 2005, the steepest rise in popularity was recorded by Hawaa World, Kooora, Vip600, Amr Khaled, Maktoob, Tadawul, Arb3 (a portal and forum for women, on all aspects of married life), ‘Alam al-Romansiyya (a ‘romantic’ site for women, made in Saudi Arabia), Startimes2

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37 Data from the Internet Services Unit of the King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (www.isu.net.sa). The list here contains, in order of popularity, sites not listed in the table above that appear in at least 12 out of the 37 months for which the ISU has published the top 30-40 sites most visited from Saudi Arabia. Web directories and technical sites are not taken into consideration here. For a more elaborate presentation, see Albrecht Hofheinz, ‘Das Internet und sein Beitrag zum Wertewandel in arabischen Gesellschaften’, Politische und gesellschaftliche Debatten in Nordafrika, Nah- und Mittelost: Inhalte, Träger, Perspektiven (Hamburg, 2004), pp 449-472.
(discussion forum of a satellite TV portal), Afdal 1000 Mawqi‘ ‘Arabi (web guide), Fosta
(entertainment site mostly for young males), Dalil MBC (web guide for young people, made
in Saudi Arabia), Lakii (a conventional site for women), Qassimy and Askhra (both general
portals), Shabakat Oz, Bent el-Halal (a matrimonial site from Egypt with Islamic orientation),
Google (both Saudi Arabia and UAE), Muntadayat Jawwal al-'Arab, and the music site 6rb.
In 2005, the biggest popularity gains among the top twenty were made by the software guide
Vip600, the salafi portal IslamWay, the soccer site Kooora, and the discussion forum/search
engine Swalif. At the other end, Gawab and Maktoob appear to be struggling with increasing
competition as Internet infrastructure improves and new service providers enter the market,
and Amr Khaled’s online popularity also has taken a clear ditch since mid-2005. If we look
more generally at the dynamics among the 200 most popular Arabic sites during 2005, we
find that forums related to the Saudi stock market,38 sports,39 sex education and pictures,40
general youth portals (not least from Egypt),41 girls and women sites,42 music downloads,43
chat,44 as well as Syrian45 and Palestinian46 sites have performed particularly well.

Overall, these data illustrate that the net is consistently sought to satisfy the following needs
(in approximate order of priority as reflected in overall traffic): facilitate and extend social
contacts (through e-mail and chat); provide news from reliable non-local sources; discuss
most everything under the sun, but especially traditional taboo topics in the realms of religion,
politics, and the relation between the sexes; be a source of entertainment, especially for music
downloads, but also for sports and gaming; provide moral guidance from what is perceived as
a contemporary Islamic perspective on modern life; offer guidance on how to live as a
Muslim woman in the modern world, including answers to all ‘conventional’ women’s issues
(beauty & fashion, cuisine, relationships, sex life, children, work and the family, etc.); provide
match-making services; and offer business information.

**Internet and civic mobilisation: a guarded hope for change**

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

‘[I]n the Middle East, where traditional news channels are often tightly controlled and heavily
censored, the new trend of interactivity with news consumers and the use of weblogs as
information channels may force the established organisations to become more competitive
and to aggressively seek the truth.’47

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38 E.g. saudistocks.com, musahim.biz, mubasher.com.sa, hawamer.com, saudishesares.net, cnbca.net,
hawamir.com. Dubai’s dfm.ae also made a mark.
40 E.g. netarabic.com, arb3.com, 66n.com, q6of.com.
42 E.g. roro44.com, arb3.com, alfrasha.com, x333x.com, 3roos.com.
43 E.g. 6rbtop.com, 6rob.com, 6rp.net.
44 E.g. 7oob.net, dardasha.net, chatrank.com.
45 E.g. syrialine.com, syrianews.com, champilress.net, arabcastle.com, scs-net.org.
46 E.g. alwatanvoice.com, mahjoob.com.
Journalists and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were among the first in the Arab world to use the Internet professionally. Meanwhile, there is hardly any Arab newspaper that has not at least experimented with online content, and many of the larger NGOs have websites. In both cases, the net first and foremost has helped to facilitate and speed up communication with the outside world: NGOs began to rely on e-mail to contact and coordinate with mother organisations and put up web pages to attract donors; journalists started to use the web to hunt for information, access wire stories and images, and issue online editions of newspapers that are primarily read by national diasporas in the Gulf States, Europe, or America. As for reaching publics at home, the Internet has long legged far behind other means of communication. The online editions of national newspapers are hardly accessed at home, and for mobilising internal support, NGOs and civil society groups rely on the telephone (especially mobile phones and SMS messages), the fax machine, and face-to-face contact more than on the Internet. The reasons are not difficult to understand: printed editions of local newspapers remain more affordable than online time, and Internet penetration of society is not broad enough yet to justify, for most local groups, the effort and expense required by well-presented and well-maintained campaign sites. This is also likely to be a reason why the presence of Arab political parties – both government and opposition – on the Internet remains weak on average. E-government services improved in 2005, with the most advanced examples being Egypt (www.egypt.gov.eg, sponsored by Microsoft and launched in 2005), the UAE (www.government.ae, completely overhauled in 2005), and Qatar (www.e.gov.qa). In most other countries, however, such initiatives remain at the testing stage, and when it comes to mobilisation, the SMS has by far overtaken the Internet in reach – no wonder, as mobile phones are much more widespread than Internet use. SMS messages were instrumental in organising protest against the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003 (the first mass street protests in Egypt since 1977 that were not arranged by organized political groups with official permission), just as they played a major role in the Lebanese demonstrations in spring 2005. Even governments have realized this potential: thus, the Sudanese authorities had a text message sent to all subscribers of the monopoly, state-controlled mobile phone service in March 2005 to call for participation in public protest marches against the UN decision to ask the International Criminal Court to investigate allegations of crimes against humanity committed by Sudanese officials in Darfur. The success of mobilisation via SMS clearly contrasts with the rather static appearance of the great majority of party websites, if they are maintained at all. In Morocco, an attempt was made to increase awareness of the 2002 parliamentary elections through the widely publicized elections2002.ma, but this appeared more aimed at promoting the ‘modernity’ of the country and the electoral commission than at providing much useful content. The Saudi Ministry of Municipalities and Rural Affairs set up a much more elaborate site (www.elections.gov.sa) to inform about and publish the results of the 2005 municipal elections, but users were split over how useful it was (53% of those polled on the site thought it was not).

Islamic groups have long been more successful in their Internet designs than their liberal or secular counterparts. This began already in the earliest days of the World Wide Web (since 1993), when Muslim student associations in America and Europe were quick to embrace the new medium to promote a global Islamic consciousness. Their mailing lists, an early example of news aggregators and widely read at the time, were one factor helping to strengthen identification with the struggles of Muslim communities in Kashmir, Bosnia, Chechnya, and

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48 With the exception of the reform-oriented Saudi daily al-Watan.
Palestine, and other places that became focal points for the development of the idea that armed struggle, or jihad, was necessary to defend Muslims against outside aggression. Meanwhile, with web technology more advanced and the use of Arabic no longer a problem, web-based news portals have taken over the torch. The most successful of all jihad-oriented news sites is ‘Mufakkarat al-Islam’ (islammemo.cc), founded at the beginning of the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003. With the fight for Faluja in November 2004, IslamMemo was able to overtake in popularity the older Moheet.com, a populist portal appealing to Islamic and Arab national sentiments that had been established in 1998 by the Dubai-based Almotahida Group (arabia-inform.com) and is produced in Egypt. Al-Mukhtasar li’l-Akhbar (almokhtars.com), founded in November 2002 by radical Wahhabis opposed to the Saudi regime, but not openly agitating against it, is the second jihad-news aggregator that figures among the top 100 most popular Arabic sites. But conservative Islamic sites that toe the line of the Saudi government continue to attract clearly more visitors than the jihad pages, especially the salafi audio-file site IslamWay.com as well as al-Khayma al-Arabiyya (khayma.com), one of the first Arabic web directories (est. 1999), and its daughters, the portal Raddadi.com and the Wahhabi missionary site Said al-Fawa’id (saaid.net). Of course, Islamic extremists also use the Internet to communicate, often via Yahoo! groups and similar electronic communities that are as easily abandoned or migrated as they are created. Some, such as the ‘Global Islamic Media’ group, have attracted considerable attention in the West, not least because a strategy paper suggesting a terrorist attack in Spain to influence elections was published there three months before the Madrid attacks of 11 March 2003. But the membership of these groups ranges between a handful and a few hundred at most. They cannot therefore be regarded as mass platforms but must be understood primarily as forums serving internal communication between insiders already converted to a cause. Similarly, websites established by militant Islamists abound, but they are constantly on the run from clampdowns, and are therefore only able to reach a devoted few who have to follow their tracks on electronic bulletin boards. One of the more persistent examples is ‘Dalil Meshawir’ that appears in many flavours and at many different addresses, among which meshawir.cjb.net has been open for quite a time at the time of this writing.

Islamic groups were also particularly apt at using the new media during elections in 2005. In Saudi municipal elections in spring, so-called ‘Golden Lists’ promoting conservative clerics and providing clear ‘Islamic’ orientation to voters baffled by the hundreds of candidates who were supposed to stand only as individuals were sent to all mobile phones, published on websites, and promoted by preachers and through word of mouth. Almost all candidates on these lists won – no wonder, commentators said, since the ‘Islamic Awakening’ (al-Sahwa) is the best-networked socio-political trend in Saudi Arabia. During the parliamentary election

\[\text{References}\]


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

campaign in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood not only went house to house, but also used websites, e-mail and mobile phone messages to provide up-to-date information and mobilise the electorate on a scale not seen before. Even secular commentators agreed that these online efforts ‘put anything else by any other political forces in Egypt to shame, including anything produced by the government.’ And this is not to belittle secular efforts like Shayfeenkum (Arabic for ‘We are watching you’, www.shayfeen.com), a website established in June 2005 to monitor the elections and ‘carry the voice of the Egyptian people to the government’ by providing, i.a., an online form where users could report irregularities to government agencies and the press. By January 2006, the site had lapsed – while the Muslim Brotherhood, after their victory, sent out ‘mass emails urging recipients to send feedback on what they expect of their elected MPs – and canvassed the opinions of voters to better understand why people were or were not voting for them.’

A comparison between the popularity of Ikhwan Online and the site of the secular opposition movement ‘Kefaya’, as recorded by Alexa during 2005, illustrates the difference:

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

While the wish for greater popular participation in decision-making is certainly great, a large part of Arab Internet users remains sceptical regarding the short-term likelihood of seeing real political change. Both hope and realistic scepticism can easily be gauged from among the thousands of online polls that every decent Arab site has put up since a few years ago, and that yield surprisingly consistent results. Internet users see their regimes glued to power for

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52 Issandr El Amrani, ‘The Brotherhood’s media offensive’, The Arabist, 30 November 2005 (http://arabist.net/archives/2005/11/30/the-brotherhoods-media-offensive/). The main Brotherhood site, ikhwanonline.com, was blocked by Egypt’s most popular ISP during the campaign (in itself witnessing to its significance!), but alternative addresses were readily available. In early November, the Brotherhood also launched a new English-language site, ikhwanweb.com (also reachable under ikhwanmonitor.com).

the sheer love of it, and due to nepotism and the fear of being held accountable by democratically legitimated successors. At least before the US invasion of Iraq, they blamed their own repressive governments much more than outside interference for the weakness of democracy in the region. And this long-entrenched experience easily explains the scepticism among Internet users regarding an ‘Arab spring.’ ‘Does the uprising in Lebanon ring in a new age of popular uprisings in the Arab world?’ asked Aljazeera.net on 5 March 2005. The response was weak (only 3452 votes) and divided: 55 per cent did not believe in such an outcome, while 45 per cent were optimistic. In September, 64 per cent expressed doubt that the presidential elections in Egypt hailed the beginning of a real democratic process. In January 2006, 59 per cent did not believe in the success of the Moroccan reconciliation process. Regarding the necessity of external pressure to strengthen internal reforms, Arab net-citizens are similarly uncertain. At the end of March 2005, Aljazeera.net asked if the US invasion of Iraq had been necessary to push the Arab world in the direction of reform and change. Where otherwise tens of thousands condemn the US occupation, only 2793 votes were cast in this poll of which, interestingly, a third agreed with the proposition. The poll was later pulled from Aljazeera.net’s archives.

**Specifics of Internet use in the Arab world**

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

**Religion: I’m a maker, not a taker**

8 per cent of the 100 most frequently visited Arabic websites take on a decidedly religious (and in this context more specifically: Islamic) character. This is a comparatively high ratio, only surpassed in Kiswahili (21 per cent) and Malay (11 per cent) cyberspace, and not observable in any of the other official languages of the UN. As reflected by Alexa in January 2006 (http://www.alexa.com/browse?&CategoryID=16). The ratio for Arabic has been stable since at least 2003. The statistical base for Kiswahili is weak; of the 38 sites ranked by Alexa, 5 were Christian missionary sites, and 3 were Islamic. Indonesian religious sites accounted for 6 per cent of the top 100 (4 Islamic, 2 Christian). 3 out of the leading 81 Tatar sites were Islamic; 2 out of the leading 100 Persian ones, 1 each among Azeri and Albanian sites, and none among Bangla, Hebrew, and Turkish sites. Alexa did not give statistics for Urdu. The Egyptian IDSC estimated in November 2005 that 65% of all Arabic content

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55 http://www.aljazeera.net/gateway/vote, voteID=1024. Cf. this with another poll in February 2005 in which almost 200000 people participated, 78 per cent of whom supported an immediate Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon (voteID=1014). In September 2004, 65 per cent of 62000 had expressed their support of such a withdrawal (voteID=901).
56 http://www.aljazeera.net/gateway/vote, voteID=1160. In December, 71 per cent conceded that the strong performance of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Egyptian parliamentary elections would have an effect on the political landscape (voteID=1251).
57 http://www.aljazeera.net/gateway/vote, voteID=1279.
however, are not the militant ones, but those promoting a moral renewal of the individual, taking to the Qur’anic injunction that ‘Allah will never change the condition of a people until they change themselves.’ Foremost among them is the site of Amr Khaled, a pietistic preacher born in Egypt in 1967 who in recent years developed a huge following first in his home country and then in other Arab states, and especially in the 15-24 age group where, as we have seen, Internet use is growing fastest. From mid-2004 to mid-2005, Amr Khaled’s site (AmrKhaled.net, est. 2002) overtook the much older IslamOnline.net (est. 1997) as not only the leading Muslim site on the Internet, but as the most popular religious site worldwide. IslamOnline was inspired by Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a preacher also from Egypt whose roots lie in the Muslim Brotherhood and who became extremely influential in the 1990s through his regular programme on Aljazeera satellite television. Amr Khaled also appears on satellite, through the Saudi-owned Iqraa and ART stations. His success – his followers can buy t-shirts with the imprint ‘I’m a maker, not a taker’ – perfectly embodies the spirit that attracts young Arabs on the Internet and far beyond:

‘Amr Khaled has a started a new movement that none of the traditional Islamic and non-Islamic leaders ever thought of. The truth is that the current limiting factors are crumbling […] . You could actually feel the vibes and the buzzing of over a hundred thousand Arabic youths visiting Amr Khaled’s website. For those youths have been given what they have been denied for many years [:] a belief in their abilities to change and to act. […] True change came into existence, not by restricting thought and forcing direction, but by accepting accountability and believing in one’s ability. […] Thirsty to be active and to be empowered, Arabic youth flood the Amr Khaled’s forums with over 4000 comments about the [TV] show and over 3000 posts about the weekly homework. [These are] young people who believe that creating a positive change is much better than criticizing a negative reality. They are fed up with the traditional political and religious disputes, and are not willing to waste anymore time arguing.’

It is interesting to note how change here is regarded as having really come into existence, even though one might argue that no substantial change has taken place on the political level. Amr Khaled in fact generally avoids talking about politics, especially domestic. The change that is considered here is a change of personal attitude and belief, and it is acted out virtually first, on the forums, where everyone can have a voice and everyone is empowered to speak. But that the ‘Amr Khaled phenomenon’ is not innocent of political implications and may

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on the Internet was of a religious nature, but no data were provided to back this up (IDSC: ‘Ta’thir al-Internet’, p 16). In any case, this can only refer to content creation, not to popularity.

59 ‘A phenomenon called Amr Khaled’, The Muslim Association of Britain (http://www.mabonline.net/islam/personalities/articles/amrkhalid.htm, accessed on 23 April 2005). See Lindsay Wise, ‘Words from the Heart’: New forms of Islamic preaching in Egypt (M.Phil. thesis, St. Anthony’s College, University of Oxford, May 2003, http://users.ox.ac.uk/~t7Emetheses/Wise.html). The popularity of Amr Khaled’s site has also attracted people disseminating on the forums propaganda in favour of al-Qa’ida (cf. the thread ‘Ba’ad an ‘ara’fa anna al-jihad haqq madha taf’al? … udkhul ya akhi li-ta’rif’ started on 28 July 2004 by one ‘Qassamiyya ‘Iraqiya’, with detailed instructions on physical training, books to read, and a discussion of the conditions of jihad – a thread since removed from the archives); but these remain a clear minority.
threaten established power hierarchies is demonstrated by the Egyptian government banning him from public preaching in 2002 – following which he went into exile and started his website.

**Discussion forums and blogs: I want my voice heard!**

The Internet discussion forums one of which is provided on Amr Khaled’s site are the second characteristic peculiarity of Arab cyberspace. No other language group debates as avidly on the Internet as Arabic speakers. One of the oldest (est. April 1998) and still most popular forums is al-Saha al-Arabiyyya (literally, ‘the Arab forum’, alsaha.com). Swalif.net (est. August 1999) and Arabsgate.com (est. July 2000) are two other sites that have been much frequented for years. There exist hundreds of dedicated discussion sites (in November 2003 I counted over 750 active ones, of which about 60 were high frequency), but forums on portal sites such as Amr Khaled, IslamOnline, or Hawaa World also play a very important role. Apart from socializing on the forum and exchanging the latest tips and news on mobile phones, computer games, sports, music, and film, the hottest topics of debate are politics, religion, and relations between the sexes – the three big taboo issues in public discourse in the Arab world. Participants hail from all shades of political opinion, and especially in the years 2000–2002, when the medium was novel, outright ‘wars’ were fought on many forums between Islamists and their ‘secular’ or ‘liberal’ opponents (terms often used interchangeably in this context to denote people opposing, at least to an extent, the use of religion in politics). After the novelty had worn out and many of the original participants became tired of the flaming language and endless repetition of statements, often without reasoned exchange of arguments, a certain disillusion set in, and many old hands withdrew. They were quickly replaced, however, by new and younger members, often from the age group that as we have seen is the fastest growing on the Internet, those below 25, who clearly express the same interest as the pioneers in marking their presence, participating, and making their voice heard. The Internet proved an ideal medium for breaking the limitations traditionally imposed on who was allowed to speak in public, and what was proper to say or even think regarding social, moral, and political order.

The year 2005 saw the breakthrough of another form of individual expression in Arabic cyberspace: blogging. Interestingly, this phenomenon reached the Arab world comparatively late. Blogs (web logs or diaries kept mostly by individuals) began to take off in the West in 2001 and soon also became an extremely important feature of Persian Internet use, among others. Iranians at home and abroad used blogs not only to publish information critical of the regime after the crackdown on the liberal press in Iran, but also for expressing themselves on personal, social, cultural etc. matters and build a virtual home for themselves where they were in control and could nurture an intimate community of friends. But even though one of the most famous bloggers of all, SalamPax, was an Arab (he chronicled his life in Baghdad from September 2002 to August 2004), and a few other blogs were published from the Arab

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60 A first anthology of Persian blogs has meanwhile been published in book form: Nasrin Alavi, *We are Iran: The Persian blogs* (Brooklyn, NY, 2005).
61 ‘Where is Raed?’ ([http://dear_raed.blogspot.com](http://dear_raed.blogspot.com)). This was the winner of the ‘Best African or Middle Eastern Weblog’ bloggie award (bloggies.com) in 2004 and 2005 (until 2003 there had been no Middle Eastern entries). It was partially published in book form by the *Guardian*, which had contracted Salam Pax to write a weekly column after the Iraq war (*Salam Pax: The clandestine diary of an ordinary Iraqi*, London 2003). Following its huge success, the first year of another English-language Iraqi blog ([http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com](http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com)) also appeared in print: Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning: Girl blog from Iraq* (New York, 2005). Since August 2004, Salam Pax has been blogging at [http://justzipit.blogspot.com](http://justzipit.blogspot.com).
world before 2004 (mostly in English), it took some time for the movement to catch on. By the turn of the year 2005, however, frustrated with the often uncivilized tone in the discussion forums and the occasional censorship exercised there, and aiming to be master in their own house, Arabs began increasingly to say ‘good-bye to the forums,’ announcing they would henceforth concentrate on blogging.62 One of the early bloggers, Abdallah al-Miheiri from Abu Dhabi (born 1979, started blogging in March 2004 at serdal.com) is credited with having come up with the Arabic translation of ‘blog’ (al-mudawwana). Arab blog rings and aggregators were set up to network the community (for Egypt, compare egybloggers.com and manalaa.net/egblogs; for an early attempt at listing all Arabic language blogs, see arabblogcount.blogspot.com; for a handpicked aggregator of ‘the best and freshest voices from across Arabia’, see itoot.net), and even the idea of an Arab ‘Bloggers Union’ was launched to represent the ‘new cultural movement.’63 The first annual Best Arab Blog Awards were voted for in February 2005, and the press began to write about the phenomenon.64 On Harvard’s Global Voices Online (a hand-picked guide), Arab blogging guru Haitham Sabbah is the most active contributor.65 Towards the end of the year, grand old Jordanian portals Makt Hob, Jeeran.com and Al-Bawaba.com began offering blogging services. Prior to that, the US charity ‘Spirit of America’ that seeks to promote ‘freedom and democracy’ in Iraq and Afghanistan had discovered the power of blogs and helped to develop a tool to allow blogging

Among the earliest blogs in Arabic were: Muharib (http://www.al7ot.net), which existed at least since December 2002, but has meanwhile been discontinued; Rafedain.com, an Iraqi anti-Saddam news site established in blog form in May 2003; Ishtar talking (http://ishtar-talking.blogspot.com), an Iraqi woman from Basra who experimented with blogging in July and August 2003; Moodless.net (b. 1979 in Kuwait) began in November 2003 and received the 2004 Deutsche Welle International Weblog Award for Arabic, as dealing ‘mainly with social and political topics. Moodless.net encourages readers to reflect on problems facing Arab world and contribute to a cultural dialog [...] While Moodless.net concerns itself with current affairs, there are also a variety of poems and literary texts, (http://www.thebobs.com/thebobs04/bob.php?site=winner_kat&katid=6); Egyptian Ahmad Gharbeia from Egypt started his ‘Tayy al-Mutassil’ (http://zamakan.gharbeia.org) in November 2003, but discontinued it in late 2005; Taqq Hanak (http://digressing.blogspot.com), set up in December 2003, but has posted regularly only since October 2004. Taqq Hanak’s blog was a runner-up to the 2005 Deutsche Welle International Weblog Awards, as tackling ‘different issues, from politics to daily life, from self expression through fine literature to advocating free speech and defending victims of oppression everywhere on Earth.’ On 21 December 2003, Faiza al-Arji, mother of Raed and Khalid Jarrar who are known Iraqi bloggers in their own right (Raed is the eponymous friend of Salam Pax; on Khaled, see n. 5), started posting on afamilyinbaghdad.blogspot.com.


with an Arabic interface; it is hosting blogs from Iraq at friendsofdemocracy.net. The majority of Arab bloggers are as critical of outside interference, however, as they are of their own regimes. In Egypt, many bloggers supported the ‘Kefaya’ (Enough!) movement (harakamasria.com) that opposed a fifth term for president Mubarak and the grooming of his son Gamal, and seeks genuine democratic reforms in the country. During the parliamentary elections in the autumn, bloggers were very active as (often self-appointed) election monitors, and the reports they published on their sites were important sources also for the traditional media.  

2005 also saw the first blogs by Egyptian soldiers. For promoting freedom of expression, the well-known Egyptian blog Manal and Alaa’s Bit Bucket (www.manalaa.net) won the special RSF award at the November 2005 Deutsche Welle International Weblog Awards. At the beginning of the year, Moroccan Tarik Essaadi’s Aljinane.com had received RSF’s ‘Freedom Blog Award’ for Africa and the Middle East.  

Al-Hayat’s well-known columnist Jihad el Khazen, who had paid increasing attention to blogs in his ‘Uyun wa-adhan’ in 2005, came out firmly in defence of blogging in early 2006. Having weighed both positive (‘freedom’) and negative aspects (not least, the doubtful identity of many bloggers), he praised Arab blogs as having broken down yet further the constraints of censorship by creating ‘a generation of “citizen journalists” who are in contact with each other, conduct impromptu dialogue, and see that their opinions reach anywhere in the world.’

Sure enough, bloggers are proud of the attention they are getting, and they do not lack self-confidence. When the Arab blog aggregator itoot.net went live on 1 January 2006, its makers announced ‘the end of media as we know it!’ Meanwhile, the next Internet craze, podcasting, is beginning to appear in the Arab world, giving rise to the latest incarnation of an age-old question: ‘Will podcasting bring democracy to the Arab world?’ Among the very first Arabic podcasts we find: Beirut Lemons Podcast (DJ BOB Beirut’s podcast ‘about Culture, Music, politics in Middle East’, started July 2005, but has not emerged from the test phase yet); MuslimStarZ Islamic Nasheed Online Radio (‘Arabic and international Islamic chants, Qur’an recitations, and variety programmes’, emerged from a website founded in November 2002 by a female Kuwaiti journalist and photographer, Athoob Alshuaibi [b. 1977] to offer web services and Islamic broadcasting. Her podcast started around August 2005 with a series of interviews with Islamic personalities, but is still in the trial phase); Amr Diab podcast (extracts from his music, provided by AmrDiab.net as an incentive to buy his...
recordings); Daghdeghni (a chat-like podcast by three young Jordanians, started 17 November 2005); Quran-Cast.net’s Holy Qur’an in Daily Segments (recited by Al-Haram al-Shareef reciters Al-Shuraim and Al-Sudais), started 26 November 2005 in Kuwait; Irhâsât Jihâd (personal podcast of Jihâd al-‘Ammâr, a Saudi computer science student at Kansas University, started 6 December 2005, the first Arabic podcast to use the Arabic script in its tags, and the first to suggest an Arabic translation of ‘podcast’: ‘mabthûth’); and Radio Monte Carlo’s (the popular French public radio’s Arabic service) hit parade Sibâq al-Aghâni. There are also some Arab podcasts in English: ‘MixUp Arabia’ (Ahmad Humaid – who claims to be the first Arab podcaster of all – speaks ‘on branding, design, architecture, media and technology, from a confused Arabia’); ‘A Saudi Life’ (‘a weekly show providing a view from Saudi Arabia about social, political and world affairs’); and Q-Arab’s Ahbab Gay Arab News.

The plethora of voices evident in this list does not immediately strike one as guaranteeing the success of democracy, but it clearly indicates an important social trend. Podcasts and blogs are ideal tools for individual expression, more suitable than discussion groups for presenting an individual’s point of view in a coherent manner. This may be one of the reasons why Arabic blogs have been especially popular so far among ‘secular’ individuals and less so among more authority oriented Islamists who had been much quicker to embrace discussion forums. The ‘I’ that speaks out is ever more put to the fore. As ‘Big Pharaoh’ (bigpharaoh.blogspot.com) characterizes his site: ‘Hi, I am from Egypt. This is my first blog ever. I would like to use it in making my voice heard. I hope you enjoy the stuff!’ This is the attitude that best characterizes Internet users in the Arab world: Increased self-confidence and belief in one’s own potential (identification, if playfully, with the ‘Big Pharao’), becoming active, making one’s voice heard, intensify and enlarge one’s social networks around common interests, have fun, overcome negativism, create something useful – to repeat the motto on Amr Khaled’s t-shirts: ‘I’m a maker, not a taker!’

Meanwhile, blogs by people with an Islamically oriented agenda are starting to appear as well (e.g. MuslimStarZ, at muslimz.com, since November 2005), but they remain much less visible so far. Among famous bloggers, MalcomX of Alexandria (http://malcommix.blogspot.com) or Baghdad’s Riverbend (riverbendblog.blogspot.com) are pronounced practicing Muslims, but with a clear anti-authority approach. Participants in training workshops of NetCorps Jordan (a pilot initiative to help communities to use computers and the Internet to improve their social and economic well-being) all described how the use of IT had brought about major positive changes in their lives. Apart from elements already elaborated, they also mentioned that IT helped them to improve organization, strategic thinking, creativity, and confidence in dealing with elder people (of higher authority) as well as those of the other sex. They also felt they had become more conscious and selective about ‘what I really want,’ and more independent of help from others, partly related to new possibilities for income generation and opportunities to save money on international phone calls or on buying books and journals (for this information I am grateful to Dr. Deborah Wheeler who presented the results of her analysis in a lecture at the University of Oslo on 18 April 2005: ‘IT for development: lessons learned from the NetCorps Jordan initiative’).
While net users become more self-assertive, they also become more selective about ‘what I really want’, and the socialisation that they experience online, through surfing and choosing as well as through participating in public debate, is one that familiarizes users more than is the case in close-knit traditional communities with the concept that people have different opinions, that one’s own views are not necessarily self-evident to all, that one has to find arguments to justify one’s beliefs, has to rationalize them, and has to accept (if grudgingly) that one will not be able to convince everybody. The loss of self-evidence of traditional worldviews and power hierarchies leaves the individual not autonomous, but certainly more exposed and conscious of its individuality, and more distinctly aware of the role of choice in creating social communities, knowledge, and values. This has led, for example, to a growing fragmentation of discussion forums – if I don’t like the one I’m currently in, I emigrate and create a new one. On the religious level, we can observe a growing assertion of expressions of ‘my Islam,’ meaning my own individual understanding of what Islam really means, as opposed to traditional or current views held by others, be they popular preachers, government-paid scholars, extremist fanatics, or the misguided masses.

Growing individual choice, better networking, faster spread of information, and more options to express oneself in public – these are some of the elements that contribute to an increasing sense of empowerment among Internet users, especially among the young in whose socialisation the net plays an ever more important role. “[A]s a new generation of users who grew up with the net becomes more vocal, blogging and other forms of self expression will continue to grow in importance.” Sociologist Fatema Mernissi (www.mernissi.net), in her study of the use of media by young Moroccans, celebrates the subversive power of the zapping satTV viewer and the civic openings created by the new ‘Sindbads’, as she dubs Arabs navigating the new frontier, cyberspace. These new spaces of freedom are lately being recognized even by those who are extremely critical of government control and repression on the net. Thus, Human Rights Watch wrote in November 2005: ‘The Internet’s role in strengthening the Egyptian human rights movement is a trend that looks likely to continue’, and ‘even those who know all too well the reasons to be afraid speak of the importance of Internet in Syrian society’. Greater transparency, and broader possibilities for participation are key issues here. These are precisely what ‘Arab Decision’ (www.arabdecision.org) seeks to further by making institutional information about the Arab

82 For a microanalysis of the dynamics on Sudanese discussion forums, see Albrecht Hofheinz ‘Kalam Sakit? Sudanese discussing state and society on the Internet,’ presentation to the 35th Annual Meeting of the Middle East Studies Association, San Francisco, CA, 18 November 2001.
83 ‘Islam NEVER said that I support a Moslem in his evil doings. At least MY Islam never said that.’ ‘You mentioned Sh. Qardawy’s statement. Who is Sh. Qardawy? Isn’t he one like many others, since we have no clergy in Islam?’ (‘Sameh Arab’ <s-arab@menanet.net>, postings in Focus on Egypt <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/free-voice>, 14 & 15 September 2001). ‘Subject: THIS IS MY ISLAM !!! / what is real islam / salah we soom we zakaah? / da2n we gullabeywa we sewak? / dah el azher bass / lakin min gowwaa ehh? / islam to me is: - enm betaal el fool ya3’sel eedo abl ma ya3mil akl lel nas ..’ etc. (Wael Abbas <waelabbas@hotmail.com>, former_internet_junkies@yahoogroups.com, 25 Feb 2003). In February 2005, Wael Abbas established a weekly news weblog, ‘al-Wa’ay al-Misri / MIR Digit@l’, which quickly became a highly regarded source of alternative information, publishing, for example, photos and video of the violent dispersion by Egyptian police of a demonstration of Sudanese refugees in front of the UNHCR office in Cairo (http://misrdigital.blogspirit.com/, 31 December 2005).
85 Fatema Mernissi, Les Sindbads marocains: Voyage dans le Maroc civique (Rabat, 2004).
world easily obtainable by citizens. If enough people are informed about what executive, legislative, judicial, administrative, economic, financial, educational, media, and civil society institutions exist in their countries, what their purpose is supposed to be, who is staffing them, what the background of these officials is, what the laws say, etc., that would help empower people better to act as citizens who know their rights and are able to claim them.

**Generational change rather than a revolution**

The dynamics evident in Arab Internet use should, however, caution us against expecting change too quickly. As we have seen, the net is used by the majority of Arab cybernauts to expand their personal space of information, expression, social networking, and private and civic activity. At least in the short run, it serves more frequently to extend one’s private sphere than decisively to strengthen civil society vis-à-vis the state. To recover and strengthen private space, however, is a goal of civil society in the Arab world as well as in Iran, where a well-informed observer concluded that such private dynamics, entrenched by demographic developments, may turn out to engender more deep-rooted change than direct political action. The Internet is one factor that in tandem with others (satellite TV, youth culture, the ‘globalisation’ of consumer products, of social networks, and of ideational configurations) creates a dynamic of change that helps to erode the legitimacy of traditional authority structures in family, society, culture/religion, and also the state, and thus creates pressure for reform. Slowly and not without setbacks, but in the end inexorably, young people are claiming ‘private’ spaces of freedom that influence their social attitudes. In the face of this process, ideas on the relations between state, society, and the individual that may have been generally accepted for generations are changing. Internet users are socialized into a mode of access to and selection and evaluation of information where the individual plays a more important role in dealing with knowledge, in the construction of knowledge, than what had been common so far. This development certainly is to be seen in a longer historical context of the expansion of literacy and mass education, but it is more than ever promoted by the new medium. It is reasonable to assume that this individualisation of knowledge construction will not only change the construction of the public sphere, but of structures of decision making in the Arab world.

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