
Arab Citizen Journalism in Action: Challenging Mainstream Media, Authorities and Media Laws

Naila Hamdy

American University of Cairo, Egypt

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Abstract

Arab citizens have adopted the blogging technology of the internet to create a venue for alternate viewpoints in a manner similar to their global counterparts. Initially a handful of bloggers, writing mostly in English and reflecting a Western flavour in their content, initiated the Arab blogosphere. They have since been joined by thousands of Arabic blogs. Their impact has been noted, whether directly on politics and media or in their ability to enable civil society by providing instant networking and expanding the space for freedom of expression. They have also created an unexpected challenge to their governments, causing inconsistent reactions. This article analyzes the region's laws, regulations and the methods used to govern those nationals who choose to join the growing number of global citizen journalists, and how they often learn to defy those rules. The primary focus has been the case of Egypt's blogs due to their influential role in the regional blogosphere.

Citizens of the Arab world have harnessed blogging technologies to produce and disseminate their journalism and opinions faster than governments can control, censor or regulate it. Similar to their global counterparts, Arab bloggers are not necessarily journalists, nor do they feel that they should be following guidelines, press laws or ethical codes set for journalists. They are instead masters of producing raw, uncensored flows of communication and are thus often referred to as citizen journalists. Benefiting from the use of personalized digital technologies and powerful innovative content, these citizen journalists are disrupting old media monopolies with the discourse on their blogs. In fact, they are often acknowledged members of the 'news media' as they are citizens who monitor events and create news content in both conventional journalistic forms and in novel forms such as blogs and social networks (Tilley and Cokley, 2008).

Adopting the internet-based technology of blogs and embracing its potential, early Arab bloggers preferred to write in English (Sifry, 2006). The 2003 war in Iraq caused several bloggers to describe the situation at hand. The most prominent of these pioneers is Salam Pax, the Iraqi architect who reported the day-to-day

tribulations of the war, paving the way for those who followed (Hamdy and Mobarak, 2004). These early bloggers inspired an explosion of writers who openly expressed their opinions on topics that were often considered taboo in the region, attracting and holding the attention of those who could read those blogs. Blogging in the English-language, their blogs mostly consisted of content that reflected the concerns of the Westernized, liberal-minded elites in the region (Lynch, 2007). Many observers also believe that these bloggers chose to blog in a foreign language as it allowed them greater liberty (Radsch, 2008; Tarawnah, 2008).

Sandmonkey, Baheyya, Sabah's Blog, Black Iris, the Arabist and Ghalia's Cocktail Blog are amongst those who became famous for their articulate posts.¹ Realizing that they had an audience, many tackled sensitive political, human rights, social and economic issues. They found that their blogs were capable of becoming a powerful source of information, an alternative to newspapers and television, at times an expansion to traditional media information, a tool for lobbying and reaching like-minded activists, and in many instances able to attract international attention to a cause (Levinson, 2005). Like other 'citizen-blog reporters' around the world, they did not have the same resources or standards as professional journalists and, like their global counterparts, they too possessed those characteristics of the global blogging culture of outspokenness, humour, intellectual honesty and open-mindedness to alternate points of view (Domingo and Heinonen, 2008).

Soon after, as the technology for writing in the Arabic language improved and became more available, a surge of bloggers began to blog in Arabic. They reached an audience that was both wider and more domestic. Most notable among the earlier Arabic blogging efforts were Egypt's Kefaya movement (Movement for Change), Wael Abbas's exposure of police brutality in Egypt and the downtown Cairo sexual harassment,² the debate following Lebanese former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri's assassination in Lebanon, and the Bahraini Shi'ite opposition voices. Some of these blogs had a power that irked authorities, causing a crackdown and leaving analysts and activists outraged at the lack of protection for those who use this technology freely (HRinfo, 2006.)

Yet, blogging continued to become more popular. By 2006, there was an estimated 40,000 Arabic blogs (HRinfo, 2006). Arab bloggers are positioned to become more influential as the use of the internet continues to grow in the region. Certainly the majority of these blogs may only carry trivial content, or may not be active, but several estimates show that significant blogs number in the thousands (Isherwood, 2008). Furthermore, what is referred to as the core bloggers have constituted an elite force that is having a powerful impact on their readers (Radsch, 2008).

Media observer Marc Lynch (2007) has provided blog analysts with a typology that categorizes these influential bloggers into activists, bridge-bloggers and public

sphere bloggers. Blogs that have been authored by activists have been used to mobilize, advocate and coordinate political movements. In Egypt, Bahrain and Kuwait these bloggers have been noticed and their influence documented both in the Arab press and by academic commentators. Primarily associated with Western ideologies and global movements, they also often leaned towards the left of the political spectrum. In later stages, they were joined by conservative activists, such as those who belong to Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. A category characterized by their direct involvement in politics, they have sporadically appeared across the Arab region, with Egypt being considered the blogosphere's breeding ground. This is because the loudest buzz was caused by Egyptian activists, who used blogs to mobilize and organize the protests of the Kefaya movement 2005. The movement had emerged as a manifestation of the Egyptian discontent toward Mubarak's presidency and the debate surrounding the possible succession of his son, gaining its highest momentum during the 2005 referendum on the constitutional amendment that would allow for a multi-candidate presidential election (Oweidat, n.d.). This grassroots political movement caused dissidents, activists, sympathizers and bloggers to merge in unison. This fusion of interests lasted through 2006, putting Egyptian bloggers into the limelight (Radsch, 2008). Alaa Abdel Fattah, with his wife Manal, are the best-known of the early activist bloggers, receiving both international recognition and time in detention.

The Egyptian blogosphere has stood out from its onset as a unique and distinctive space of contention and debate. Within a short period its most recognized members became known for their striking involvement in political activism. However, Egyptians were not the only early avid bloggers; others were inspired and quickly joined their virtual peers. The Bahraini bloggers, smaller in number and narrower in focus, were also noticed for their gutsy publications. Their blogs openly helped to organize protests and clandestine meetings. Several were threatened and arrested by security agencies, becoming well known following their ordeal. Bahraini activists have continued to blog, unearthing further abuses, such as the so-called 'Bandargate' scandal.³ This is a blog where bloggers fervently posted compelling information on the corruption of members of the ruling royal family best personified in this case by Sheikh Ahmad bin Ateyatalla Al Khalifa. Kuwaiti activists came on board later, during the 2006 elections, advocating for the reduction of electoral districts to cut down on notorious election fraud. These potent blogging instances had an impact on the political arena according to Lynch (2007).

The second category of bloggers identified by Lynch (2007) is the bridge-bloggers. They are mostly attempting to reach Western audiences with English-language blogs filled with accounts of their lives and communities. Receiving a disproportionate interest in their postings in the West, they are rarely noticed by fellow citizens or Arab media and have not been perceived as a menace by Arab

authorities, despite the significant number in this category. Mainly viewing themselves as a venue for dialogue and intercultural exchange of ideas, they are constantly attempting to modify negative images of Islam and Arabs in the West (Beckerman, 2007). Noted peaks of this type of blogging followed events such as 9/11, the London bombings and the Danish cartoon controversy, as the bloggers try to alter what they perceive as Western misperceptions of the East (Egyptian Chronicles Blog, 2008). Bridge-bloggers are plentiful; Tarawnah (2008), the author of the Black Iris blog, is one such example and he identifies himself as an economic blogger who wants to change the Western mindset toward Jordan. His mission is to explain his country and region to the outside world. He blogs freely and has had no problems with the state. Nonetheless, he admits that, like many other Arab bloggers who are aware of their limits, he too practices self-censorship.

Lynch's third category, the public sphere bloggers, provides the Arab blogosphere with the most vibrant, argumentative and often most informative commentary available. They may blog in either language, they may be highly politicized but, unlike activist bloggers, according to Lynch (2007), they are not organized activists. Yet the differences between categories in Lynch's typology are not always distinct. The line between activist and public sphere blogging is not always clearly defined. A recent study conducted at the American University in Cairo indicates that the majority of Egyptian bloggers, for instance, are mainly concerned with content of a political nature. There are also indications that there was a strong network between the activist type and the public sphere type of bloggers during the evolution of blogging, particularly in Egypt (El-Hefnawy, 2008). Furthermore, given the opaque nature of blogging, a blogger's political affiliations and associations are not always ascertainable. Thus, it is not always possible to distinguish the activist from the public sphere contributor. Nonetheless, these categories can be used as a general guide to map an active, growing, diverse and often fragmented blogosphere.

Viewed through Lynch's lens, two popularly read and influential blogs in the category of public sphere bloggers in the Arab world have been Issandr El-Amrani's Arabist Network, which functions as a type of a forum for information on Egypt's activism, and Baheyaa, a commentary site that has been publicly acknowledged by the region's most renowned journalist, Hassanein Heikal, on his show on Al-Jazeera television.

The blogs spectrum has many voices; and many choices. Jordanians can be heard debating Arab feminism (Jordan Free Voices Blog, n.d), Moroccans can be heard discussing taboo topics such as the monarchy, religion and the disputed Western Sahara region on 'Blogoma', which houses a large number of uncensored blogs (Ibahrine, 2008), while the Algerians discuss Berber nationalism (Forum for Berber Culture Blog).

Public sphere bloggers have also attempted to become agents of social change. An illustrative case is that of Arab cyber-feminists, who by some accounts are more active than their male counterparts in using this medium to promote change (Al-Nemr, 2006). Unlike their bridging counterparts, public sphere bloggers have also been noticed by authorities simply because of their influence and consequently subjected to some forms of intimidation (Khoder, 2008), despite the fact that the majority of the Arab countries do have constitutional freedom and many are also signatories to Articles 18 and 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

Yet, although these guarantees exist, freedom of expression and freedom of the press are not values that are revered by Arab governments who, for decades, had become accustomed to controlling information through state-owned media. But, with the surge in alternate media available in the region – whether through satellite television stations, internet access and more recently blogs – there is no doubt that freedom of expression restrictions have loosened considerably since the 1990s, when Arab media began its empowerment. As the media in the region gradually change, governments are reluctantly becoming more comfortable with alternative or controversial opinions (IREX, 2005). In this context, even though blogs have constituted an added headache to authorities, the latter have more or less accepted this phenomenon. There are examples of draconian, outdated and crude methods that governments have used to stifle some bloggers, but many continue to blog. In the instances where government reactions have been extreme it was the lack of legislation to regulate these new environments that can be mostly blamed for this.

Generally, bloggers are not restricted in the Arab region. Bloggers have the freedom to post their opinions on the internet with no limitation. Few have been restricted. But those who have been in trouble for their blogging have faced severe penalties and have no laws to protect them. The bulk of the cases where there has been punishment have been in Egypt, Tunisia and Syria (HRW, 2005).

In the absence of laws that tackle the issues of freedom of speech in relation to bloggers, penal codes are used as an alternative to prosecute them. As noted earlier, the Egyptian blogosphere has been distinctive; its bloggers have played a notable role in the quest of Egyptian citizens for political and social reform. For that reason, Egypt's authorities have been in the forefront in terms of accusations against bloggers. The Egyptian Constitution guarantees the freedom of press and press censorship is forbidden. The Supreme Press Council is responsible for dealing with matters concerning the press, but, since bloggers are not considered press, these guarantees are automatically deleted (Egyptian Constitution, n.d.). There are other articles and stipulations in Egypt's Constitution that guarantee citizens' freedoms, but the repressive Emergency Law in use since 1981 can also be exploited to restrict those freedoms (HRinfo, 2006).

Egypt's internet matters fall under the 2003 Law no. 10/4 of the Telecommunications Regulation Act, under which the National Telecommunications Authority was created. This authority has the right to administer telecommunications in Egypt. Within this framework, articles of the law can criminalize some abuses of telecommunication uses, but none of these articles address publishing and broadcasting information online. Other vaguely written stipulations allow for security authorities to acquire access to user information and movements through internet service, provided this is within 'the limitations of the law', but these articles do not handle the online content either. Other laws, such as Law no. 82/2002, provide a framework for online publishing vis-à-vis 'Intellectual Property Rights', while Law no. 15/2004 regulates electronic signatures and Article 76 of the civil affairs Law no. 143/1994 addresses some online crimes such as hacking. To date, despite circulating news that Egypt will issue an internet law, no law has been established to address internet content. This has left bloggers vulnerable and open to abuse. Several Egyptian citizens have been detained, or jailed, for their blog posts (Initiative for an Open Arab Internet, n.d.a).

When Egyptian national Abdel Kareem Nabil Seliman aka Karim Amer started writing regularly on his blog, he was arrested November 2006 and sentenced to four years in prison for the content that he published. This case marked the first time that an Egyptian was punished explicitly for what he wrote.⁴ Seliman was accused of inciting strife and defaming Islam, deliberately disseminating information that disturbs public security and insulting the President of Egypt. He was charged under three articles of Egypt's Penal Code. These are Article 102, which allows for the detention of anyone who diffuses news, information, or rumors that disturb public security or cause damage to the public interest; Article 176, which allows for the imprisonment of instigators of discrimination because of race, origin, language and belief; and Article 179, which permits for the imprisonment of anyone who offends the President of the country. Despite support from bloggers, internal and external organizations and individuals to have his case reviewed, he continues to languish in prison (Amnesty International, USA, n.d.; Initiative for an Open Arab Internet, n.d.b).

By 2007, Egyptian authorities began what cyber-activists refer to as 'the War on Bloggers', describing how the authorities use a heavy hand when dealing with the government's virtual critics (Radsch, 2008). Since then, several cases of the state security services harassing bloggers have been reported. Abdul Moneim-Mahmud spent two months in an Egyptian prison as he was accused of belonging to an illegal organization in reference to the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood, but was later released. However, analysts believe that he was detained because of his online postings of police brutality allegations⁵ (Reporters without Borders, n.d.). The Coptic human rights activist and blogger Hala El-Masry was also reportedly

harassed by security, although she says that that her blog had previously been shut down⁶ (Sandels, 2007). Other bloggers claim that they have been harassed, arrested, intimidated and pressured and these include some of the key blogger activists of Egypt (Radsch, 2008).

Accusations and condemnations have continued. By the end of 2008, it was reported that three bloggers, Reda Adel Rahman, Mohamed Adel and Abdelaziz Mogahed, have been held in prison for their blog content, which indicated strong Islamist leanings. According to Reporters without Borders and the Arab Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI), two of these bloggers were detained for their support for Hamas (Palestinian Islamist Party) on their blogs⁷ (Reporters without Borders, 2008).

Clearly, in any account of oppression of internet activists, Egypt will stand out as an example of exaggerated measures taken against bloggers, although Egypt's government has strongly supported internet initiatives in view of its importance to socio-economic development. This began with the formation of the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology in 1999 with a specific mandate to establish and help build Egypt's information society. At an accelerated pace, the ministry de-regulated and liberalized the telecommunication industry, encouraged private sector involvement in the new industry, initiated skills training nationwide, and allowed for foreign investment and technology transfer. Other potent initiatives have included the introduction of the free access to the internet model, e-government, low-priced PCs, availability of economical software for educational purposes, and internet access centers and the establishment of the Smart Village as a physical space created for the housing of IT-related companies and ministries (Hashem, n.d.). More than a decade later, the government continues to push forward with Egypt's internet adoption efforts (information available on MCIT website).⁸

Yet, despite all the good intentions toward internet promotion, the present level of connectivity has brought on the unexpected consequence of online activism. The Egyptian authorities have in fact been challenged by powerful advocacy from bloggers. This challenge has been part of a national dialog between the government and Egypt's people as the country witnesses a push for a more democratic state. The 2005 election period and the continuation of numerous strikes and demonstrations are indications of an evolving dynamic in the country. These conditions have been specific to Egypt and are not necessarily comparable to other countries in the region where blogging has taken root. Egypt is the most populous nation in the Arab region, and its government struggles with pressure from both internal and external forces to initiate political and economic reform. Egypt's unique but internally unpopular relationship to Israel, combined with harsh economic conditions and frustrations, has meant that the government has

felt the threat of Islamic radicalization for decades. Repressive emergency rule has been used to preserve the status quo, while increased levels of freedom and political participation have been allowed. The result has been a government that is constantly treading a fine line between allowing more freedoms whilst struggling to keep the volatile nation from the brink of a revolt against its rulers.

It is also important to clarify, although not justify, that the number of those citizens who have received jail sentences is not more than a handful. What's more, recorded cases of aggressive surveillance, harassment, censorship and detention are also relatively few. Despite the debate surrounding these incidents, and the public outcry, particularly from Western democracy advocates, there are many local analysts who believe that members of Egypt's security apparatus have simply overreacted to the blogging phenomenon based upon their ignorance of the medium, or that their reaction could be a purposefully designed distraction for the public. These actions have been compared to the 1997 crackdown on the heavy metal Satanists of Egypt (Kassem, 2008).⁹ Furthermore, suppressing acts of non-conformity by youth has been witnessed frequently, not just in Egypt but in other Arab countries such as Morocco, Yemen and Lebanon (Whitaker, 2003). Despite panic over the region's trend of blogger arrests, the number does remain limited (Campagna, 2008), although constant, and state security continues to appear preoccupied with cyber movements. As the Egyptian blogosphere matures, activists have continued to quickly adapt newer internet technologies, such as Facebook, Flickr, Twitter, and embraced their convergence with mobile phones to further advance their causes. In an exemplary case, on 6 April 2008 a Facebook movement mobilized Egyptians to join the Mahalla textile workers in a general strike. The Facebook group had attracted 70,000 persons in a short time. Noting their use of the social network site for activism, state security reacted harshly by arresting its organizers, together with several prominent Egyptian bloggers (Fleishman, 2008). Although later released, their detention is yet another example of the authorities' usual heavy-handed response to unknown manifestations of evolving new media platforms.

This politicized moment also gave Egyptian bloggers the opportunity to further exhibit how savvy they are with new technologies by extensive use of Flickr and Twitter technologies to update their sites, and inform journalists and human rights organizations of the situation on the ground. An American journalist who had been arrested was able to 'twitter' his release only because he was connected to Egypt's most powerful bloggers, including award winners¹⁰ Nora Younis and Wael Abbas, and Amr Gharbia (Radsch, 2008).¹¹

Another reaction to this activism, at least in the case of Egypt, has been the publicly unnoticed drafting of a new audio-visual media law that would address the transmission of any digital content. The draft bill was, however, leaked and

published on 9 July 2008 by an independent Egyptian newspaper. The proposed law is to regulate 'all aspects related to broadcasting, especially its content and the distribution and receiving of transmissions'; it encompasses all types of transmission, including digital transmission. It also technically allows for severe punishment of violators, not just through fines but also by imprisonment. If passed, this law may, in comparison to penal codes, intensify punishment of bloggers rather than protect them (El-Sayed, 2008). The publishing of this draft has triggered much debate among media observers, as many fear it will limit freedoms further and set standards of oppression for other Arab governments. The final version has yet to be passed by the Egyptian Parliament.¹²

It must also be noted that Egypt's government does send mixed signals in relation to freedom of expression. One sign that the state could be re-evaluating their tolerance of bloggers and other cyber activists came in the acquittal on 31 December 2008 of bloggers Manal and Alaa Abdel Fattah, and human rights lawyer Gamal Eid, who had been involved in a libel and defamation case brought by Judge Abdel Fatah Mourad. The judiciary has also recently rejected the same judge's request to filter 49 websites and blogs (Initiative for an Open Arab Internet, n.d.c). This indicates that government practice can change.

The big picture shows that offences against internet bloggers are only one aspect of the story. There are other facets. The majority of Arab countries are aggressively promoting internet activity to attract foreign investment, encouraging the private sector to join the global economy and supporting scientific and educational research. In fact, Arab leaders and policymakers have shown a quick understanding on the issue of connectivity, opportunity, growth and development, setting the stage effectively for the rapid expansion of the internet.

Egypt is not the only country that has launched specific ministries responsible for information and communication technologies, embarked on campaigns to connect citizens and initiated laws to oversee this new communication medium. Tunisia, Algeria, Oman and the United Arab Emirates are among those who have established similar successful initiatives, which have been the driving force and main facilitator behind the dynamism in their information and communication technology sectors.

There are also wide discrepancies between countries in the methods they use to handle internet expressions. This ranges from countries that have no record of blogger harassment to those who have been listed as violators and enemies of freedom of expression. In some cases, blogger freedom is related to the relative low public participation via the internet commonly referred to as citizen journalism, while in other cases the authorities are genuinely making a true commitment to the internet with all that may come with it. Internet adoption rates

are varied in a region where some countries are well developed and wealthy while other countries are war-ravaged and impoverished.¹³ Thus, a country like Algeria does not yet have a blogging culture, while Jordan and the UAE have significantly active blogospheres.

There is one clear commonality, though, that, with few exceptions, none of the countries of the region have laws that deal specifically with internet publishing and that governments do have wavering attitudes toward bloggers. For instance, Jordan has no specific legislation on internet use; in comparison to other nations in the region the kingdom has an unusually high level of freedom on the internet, although like in Egypt, there have been moments of hesitation.

The Jordanian corner of the Arab blogosphere is active and free, despite human rights organizations' reports that there is an indication that security forces monitor the internet and, in the past, there have been blocked websites. Nonetheless there is no concrete evidence or reports of blogger arrests, harassment or detainment. Even with the recent announcement that the Ministry of Interior has recently sanctioned the monitoring of the widespread internet cafes that are rumoured to be the highest in number per head of population worldwide (HRinfo, 2008), Jordanian bloggers have not been intimidated. In fact they insist that, to date, their blogging has been free of intervention (Tarawnah, 2008). In an unusual move for a head of state, in July 2008 the Jordanian monarch King Abdullah II, recognizing the importance of blogs, commented on the popular local blog of Black Iris following his publication of an interview he had given to Jordanian press. The monarch's comment, 'People must not be afraid to express their opinions without using aliases. We are a country of freedom, tolerance, diversity and openness, and everyone has the right to express their thoughts', and his use of this medium indicate a tolerant attitude toward blogging.¹⁴ It may be too early to judge whether this heralds an unprecedented era of freedom for bloggers, but it certainly shows that positive mindsets are possible. Certainly, this country's experience is an example which shows that it is possible that bloggers need not be stifled. The Arab region's governments can become accustomed to this new form of expression and learn to be more appreciative of freedoms. The key is to have laws that address internet publications in an open manner, allowing only for the punishment of convicted criminals.

Media and Public Response to Bloggers

Along with their impact on the political arena, Arab bloggers have also had an influence on the more traditional media outlets, including state-owned media. This is important when evaluating the impact of blogs, not just in the Arab region but worldwide. Determining the exact size of a blogosphere and mapping its readers is not yet a precise science, however, even a small number of readers does not imply

a weak impact. Isherwood (2008) refers to media scholars Eickelman and Alterman, who have both pointed to the fact that Arab blogs influence the elite, opinion leaders and opinion makers. Blogs also have a powerful impact, not in their ability to directly influence the public but in their ability to influence media, which in turn influence larger publics.

With their bold approach, bloggers have often tackled contentious issues that mainstream media have ignored. By 2005, media professionals realized that they were being confronted with unknown bloggers who were changing the Arab media landscape. They could no longer ignore the challenge and began instead to incorporate their tips in their coverage, chase the same stories, interview bloggers, invite them to their talk shows and often admire their candour. Some pro-government media persons have even given platform to bloggers by openly criticizing rather than admiring them; but that too brings attention to bloggers.

As for Western media, it has extensively covered the content and behavior of Arab bloggers. Much attention has been focused on Arab bloggers; some have been immortalized for their calls for political and social reform, to the extent that many Arab bloggers have learnt how to court the Western press. The *Financial Times*, the *Washington Post*, *The Observer*, and the CNN and ABC networks, among others, have glamorized Arab bloggers who have called for reform (Amba 2008; Saudi Jeans Blog, n.d.). In a global world, because of the multi-directional flows of communication, this too influences Arab media and Arab publics.

A case in point is that of the bloggers who exposed the sexual harassment incident that occurred in downtown Cairo in 2006 during a public holiday. For several days, the state media did not report the story. However, the Associated Press and satellite television channels picked up on the blogs and testimonies from witnesses. A snowball effect took place; it became a topic discussed in the media, universities and other gatherings. Feminists organized demonstrations, and citizens were angered. Ultimately, the story that was broken by a few bloggers was subsequently forced onto the national agenda (El-Tahawy, 2006). The ripple effect continues; by the end of 2008 the Egyptian media, individuals, religious figures, civil society organizations and now Parliament have championed the rights of Egyptian women in relation to the commonly practiced harassment (Abdelhadi, 2008; Stack 2008). What began as a blog entry about an incident and a social ill that had been suppressed and ignored has become, within a short period, a significant topic in the Egyptian psyche. No doubt the number of internet users who saw the original blog may not have been large in number, but the long-term effect of the magnified posting continues to have much potential impact.

Another illustrative example is that of police brutality videos, posted by bloggers in Egypt, depicting two policemen savagely torturing a bus driver in a police station.

After circulation on blogs, the incident was picked up by *Al Fagr* and *Masry Al Yom*, both independent Egyptian newspapers. The multiplier effect began. The victim was recognized by authorities and imprisoned for three months on the charge of obstructing officials. The driver, the bloggers, the media and public attention pursued the officers. Eventually they were tried and sentenced to three years (Isherwood, 2008). This incident was viewed within the context of police brutality in Egypt. This too became a topic of national debate, giving opportunity for others to follow. Talk shows, government newspapers and radio stations brought the issue to their agendas, shows and articles. Although police brutality is not unheard of in Egypt, the public became much more conscious of yet another social ill when a lone blogger Mohamed Abdullah Khaled posted the video on his blog. The viewing of this barbaric incident not only caused higher awareness but also grabbed public attention, causing the government to scramble to portray the rape as an isolated occurrence and to try the officers. Furthermore, it also gave momentum to human rights organizations and civil society organizations that for years had been accusing the Egyptian Ministry of Interior of using uncouth techniques of interrogation against suspects (El Khashab, 2006; Stack, 2007). Once again, this example shows that blogging's influence on media and the public can intensify impact on wider circles.

Internet-based blogs, have influenced and complemented media at many peak political times in the region over the past few years. Lebanon too has an active blogosphere, one that has had several critical events to feed its blogs. The 2005 assassination of Rafiq Al Hariri, the ensuing 'Mehlis' Report and the Cedar Revolution gave opportunities for bloggers to voice their opinions, entering the Lebanese public debates (Hamdy, 2006). Later, during the 2006 Israel-Hizbollah conflict, an unusual marriage of media was noted. The war was extensively covered by bloggers and traditional media, with an unusual blend of cross-format trends. Evidence of traditional media covering bloggers and bloggers covering traditional media are plentiful. Journalists posted images that were not palatable to their audiences on their personal blogs, while bloggers feverishly analysed the media, and some media outlets went further and hired citizens to blog. In an exemplary instance, the US network Fox hired an American, Spencer White, who stayed in Beirut during the war specifically to blog his notes on the war. The popularly viewed Arab news station Al-Arabiya featured audience-uploaded video reports, giving their audience citizen's perspectives. While Hanaday Salman, a journalist at the Beirut based *As-Safir* newspaper, used bloggers to send out her messages which were ill suited for the conventions of print and broadcast formats. In essence, it can be said that a large portion of the information flow about the conflict was contributed to the blogosphere by citizen journalists. With bloggers blogging in and out of Lebanon, this conflict is considered the most blogged about war in recent history. Undoubtedly, this intense blogging was able to influence the

priorities of traditional media coverage (Ward, 2007) and in turn influence the public around them.

As the region enters another politically turbulent time with the Israeli attacks on Gaza, bloggers are once again beginning their vigorous coverage, analysis and commentary on the war. At the time of writing, just a few days into the war, it will not be possible to make a balanced judgment on their overall influence, but suffice to note that bloggers are not missing this opportunity.

It is worth mentioning, though, that Al Jazeera, the Arab world's influential media outlet, has adopted the use of quickly updated user-generated citizen journalism micro reports, videos, comments, links from Israel, Gaza and the West Bank, by combining these reports after verification with pinpointed locations on a virtual map¹⁵ (Shachtman, 2009).

Conclusion

A handful of core Arab bloggers have been able to contribute to shaping public opinion during politically charged moments, to motivate society toward bringing about social reform, to influence Arab media, to receive attention from the West, and to mobilize dissidents causing a number of reactionary state security apparatuses to confront them directly and indirectly for their citizen journalism. Yet there are no laws that govern bloggers. They are not considered journalists, they have no syndicates, and they have no press laws that can be used to shield them.

Recognizing their vulnerability, bloggers and observers alike are apprehensive for the future of bloggers in the region. Bloggers are afraid that government intimidation methods will affect blogging while the fragmentation and competition between blogger factions may also weaken their effect (Isherwood, Radsch 2008). This unease has also been reflected in reactions to regulations or proposed regulations that are translated as restrictions to freedom of expression by blogger proponents. When members of the Arab League ratified the Arab Charter for Satellite Television, an attempt to regulate the Arab satellite media, it was vehemently critiqued by its opponents for suppressing contrary views (*The Economist*, 2008). Although this charter does not address online activity it did set fear and debate about freedom in the region causing speculation that a regional Internet law would be next.

Bloggers dread a regional regulation that would restrict the flow of information. This has not been officially formed. Nonetheless, the 2006 convention of the Arab Interior Ministers' Council held in Tunisia included a call to Arab countries to unite in their efforts to fight terrorism and to enact legislation that would allow

them to suppress any communication that promotes extremist ideologies (HRinfo, 2006). If such a regulation is endorsed, it could on the one hand be abused and used to stifle diverse opinions, but on the other hand it could limit the power of security forces to act freely against bloggers with no legal basis.

In this climate of conflicting signals in relation to Internet freedoms, it is natural that Arab bloggers are concerned that further limits on their communicative expression are predictable. Many also fear that regional regulation may in fact be in the pipeline.

Thus the following questions remain for the moment. Will regional regulation have the effect of clamping down on bloggers? Can bloggers be intimidated? Perhaps some, but it is doubtful that activist bloggers will quit their blogging. First, the majority of bloggers are young – they are at an age where they have innate courage. They are fearless and they want to express their opinion. Second, many authors are political activists. They will continue with their activism with or without the tool of blogs. They do not care about hassles from authorities but in fact wear these incidents as badges of honour. Police intimidation does not faze them; they sometimes appear to be deliberately provoking authorities as being detained is often the only way they can make their case.

Actually, ‘activist’ bloggers consider their blogs a virtual extension of the street. They themselves admit that they use blogs to mobilize supporters to demonstrate; they admit that they get arrested and then report this on their blogs. They enjoy the limelight they receive from those readers who recognize them. They belong to a community of activists who are friends and also have blogs. Several countries, such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, have communities of bloggers who meet face to face on a regular basis. This was also the case when Egyptian bloggers were smaller in numbers. They know that they are known to state security but they also feel that public opinion is on their side because they say they are fighting for freedom of expression. They are also very aware of the foreign press, analysts and observers who report on their efforts and give them global visibility (Cairo Talking Heads Blog, n.d.). This visibility has led some bloggers to feel secure and protected particularly because of the recognition, help and support that they receive from international organizations such as Reporters without Borders (Tarawnah, 2008).

Moreover, rarely are Arab bloggers anonymous. Even those who use pseudonyms are known persons. They give interviews, respond to email and appear on talk shows. They contribute to academic panels and meet with university students. In fact, they are also providing a role model for a generation of young Arabs who are impressed with their courage. It should also not be forgotten that many journalism programmes in the region are encouraging students to look at new global trends, such as citizen journalism. Within these schools cyber activists Fouad Al-Farahan,

Wael Abbas, Zohair al-Yehiawy and Hossam el-Hamalawy have become folk heroes to the young.¹⁶ In addition, due to the relative ease of starting a blog, many students are required to maintain blogs by instructors who are joining other educational pioneers in encouraging students of journalism to learn about and create citizen journalism (Christian 2006). Although this may have started in Western journalism programmes, it has spilled over to some of the more up-to-date programmes in the region (Amin, 2008). This is only one aspect of how these bloggers can influence future generations; it also indicates how security services and other authorities are fighting a losing battle, something that has often been remarked on by bloggers (Salama, 2007).

At any rate, rather than fight battles bloggers should recognize the importance of their publishing. They should also recognize that what they publish is public and therefore they should realize that they are accountable. If the press and other journalists are liable for their reporting then so should citizen journalists be.

In addition, since there is strong evidence that Arab bloggers have been successful in connecting with each other and often lobbying for each other actively, then they can presumably work together to set standards that are ethical and professional, making it harder for authorities to find contrived reasons to punish them for their acts of blogging. Within a more organized and credible framework, bloggers can advocate for laws that fairly address both their rights and their obligations.

Arab bloggers have had some real successes in terms of their ability to guide the public to discuss and participate in debates; their talent in rallying protesters; and their ability to influence the often timid media of the region. For these reasons, they are in a position to wield more power in the future as they continue to grow in number and boldness. However, as long as they remain vulnerable to the whims of authorities, and as long as they have no rules or laws to regulate and/or protect them, they will remain a marginalized force.

Notes

¹ See <http://www.sandmonkey.org/>; <http://baheyya.blogspot.com/>; <http://sabbah.biz/mt/>; <http://www.black-iris.com/>; <http://arabist.net/>; <http://cocktail4.blogspot.com/>

² Videos posted by bloggers showed hordes of men assaulting women at a downtown Cairo location during a major national holiday. The videos gave broad publicity to this incident which had not been covered by media.

³ The Bandargate scandal refers to allegations that Dr Salah Al-Bandar, a former member of the government of Bahrain, had compiled a report that referred to the existence of a secret

organization formed to marginalize the Shia community. The alleged organization was headed by a member of the royal family Sheikh Ahmad bin Ateyatalla Al Khalifa.

⁴ Karem Amer's Blog (Arabic) <http://karam903.blogspot.com/>

⁵ Abdul Moneim-Mahmud Blog (Arabic) <http://ana-ikhwan.blogspot.com/>

⁶ Hala El Masry Shut Down Blog in Arabic: <http://www.halaelmasry.blogspot.com/>

⁷ Reda Abderrahman Ali Blog in Arabic

<http://www.elaphblog.com/page.aspx?U=459&page=2>

Mohammed Adel Blog in Arabic <http://43arb.info/meit>

Abdelaziz Mogahed Blog in Arabic <http://elmogahed02.blogspot.com>

⁸ Egypt Ministry of Information Technology website <http://www.mcit.gov.eg/> (consulted January, 2009).

⁹ A group of heavy metal music fans were arrested in Egypt in 1997 and consequently vilified by the press in a massive national campaign that accused them of Satanism. Other than the lyrics of the songs and the clothing that the young people wore, there was no concrete evidence that such a cult existed. However, the campaign caused for deep concern in a conservative predominantly Muslim country.

¹⁰ Nora Younis has won the Human Rights First award, Wael Abbas won the Knight International Journalism and Amr Gharbia won the Deutsche Welle International Weblog Award.

¹¹ Nora Younis Blog in Arabic <http://norayounis.com/>; Wael Abbas Blog in Arabic

<http://misrdigital.blogspot.com/>; Amr Gharbea Blog in Arabic <http://gharbeia.net/>

¹² An English version of the draft law can be read on the Arab Media & Society website. http://arabmediasociety.sqgd.co.uk/topics/index.php?t_article=218

¹³ Numbers of users can be viewed at <http://www.internetworldstats.com/>

¹⁴ King Abdullah II's comment can be viewed at <http://www.black-iris.com/2008/07/02/candid-interview-king-abdullah-tackles-the-latest-controversial-issues-in-jordan/#comment-121666>

The Black Iris post that created this feedback can be viewed at <http://www.black-iris.com/2008/07/02/candid-interview-king-abdullah-tackles-the-latest-controversial-issues-in-jordan/#comment-121666>

¹⁵ The Jazeera Lab can be viewed at <http://labs.aljazeera.net/warongaza/reports/submit>

¹⁶ Saudi blogger and activist Fouad-Al-Farahan is blogging again following his release from prison at <http://saudijeans.org/>

Egyptian blogger and activist Wael Abbas continues to blog in Arabic at

<http://misrdigital.blogspot.com/>

Tunisian Journalist Zohair al-Yehiawy was the internet's first person to be imprisoned for publishing a news website. <http://anhri.net/en/reports/net2004/tunis.shtml>

Egyptian blogger and activist Hossam el-Hamalawy blogs at <http://arabist.net/arabawy/>

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