Internet Freedom in the Arab World: Its Impact, State Controls, Islamisation and the Overestimation of it All

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The struggle for freedom of expression in the Arab world, in the media and other domains, takes place against two sets of control: state control and religious control. Ruling groups and religious forces in Arab countries have in common a hostile perception of "uncontrolled" media freedom, each party being preoccupied with different concerns and fears. These concerns sometimes meet, diverge, or collide. Governments want to keep a tight control against freedom of political expression; religious forces want to keep a tight control on cultural, social and entertainment freedoms. Advocates of freedom of expression have mostly, and rightly so, directed their efforts against state controls. However, though not equally effective, non-state hostility toward many aspects of the internet is widely accepted.

With these two fronts of hostility against freedom of the media in mind, the following discussion attempts to provide a broader and multi-levelled examination of the present particular status of internet freedom. Any juxtaposition of the State as the freedom-controller against the opposition parties as freedom-promoters is simply misleading. Large segments of opposition groups in the Arab world, especially those with a religious bent, embrace a stricter stance on media freedom than the regimes that they oppose. Islamist movements that partake in any power or have members in parliaments (say in Sudan, Jordan, Lebanon, Bahrain, Kuwait, Yemen, Iraq, Algeria, and Morocco) have achieved a poor record in defending media and internet freedoms apart from those which relate specifically to their own movements. Freedoms are promoted and opposed in a peculiarly selective and self-suiting way by various socio-political and religio-cultural actors. This selectivity is characteristically apparent, and particularly damaging, in the case of internet freedom. The promotion of freedom as a wholesale transforming process is still highly contentious, and disagreements on the meaning and limits of freedom are vast. This is reflected in the prevailing paradoxical attitude among many opposition groups in Arab countries, where the struggle to extract political freedom from authoritarian regimes can often go in tandem with the approval of, if not the demand for more, restrictions and control over religious and social freedom.

Overblown Impact?

Statistics concerning the use of the internet –quoted cautiously here– show that the internet penetration rate in the Arab world is significantly low at 14.2% (www.internetworldstats.com, 31 March 2009). This lack of access makes many Arabs feel bitter when compared to Israel's rate of 74.0%, Europe's 48.9%, North America's 74.4%, or even Latin America's 29.2%. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) takes the lead among Arab countries at 48.9%, whereas Yemen lags at the bottom with only 1.4%. It is estimated that the number of Arabic-speaking blogs exceeds 450,000 the world over; however, almost one-third of them are in or about Egypt, where the rate of penetration hardly reaches 13%.

These low levels of internet use in the Arab world are coupled with high rates of illiteracy, which exceed 40% in Egypt, Morocco, Sudan, and Yemen. Add to this situation two factors that further limit the impact of the internet: the increasing repressive state measures against internet freedom and the overpricing of internet use (which is six times more in the Arab world than in Europe). All of this combined together trims off much of the unfounded euphoria about the poten-

tial change that the internet in the Arab world is assumed to make. Caution against the overestimation of the impact of the internet is thus a more than needed caveat. There is no doubt that the internet has created an expansive Arabic sphere for freedom of expression and unlocked new territories. But it is equally true that it is still elitist in nature and form. Because of language and high levels of technological illiteracy, vast portions of the Arab public remain attached solely to TV or radio broadcasting. Parallels of the wishful thinking and exhilaration that accompanied the rise of trans-border TV broadcasting in the Arab world (e.g. the Al-Jazeera phenomenon) in relation to change-making are presently seen in the exaggeration of the impact of the internet.

State Controls, First and Foremost!

While all Arab countries impose restrictions on free internet access, the scale and magnitude of controls vary. Alas, Arabic-speaking websites advocating internet freedom are flooded with features and news about new restrictions, banned websites, arrests of bloggers and even pan-Arab concerted official efforts against "some dangers of the internet." Examples of such news items would give an entry point to a broader discussion, providing a general picture, albeit a grim one, of the state of affairs of internet freedom in this region.

Over the course of writing this, during the last week of March and the first week of April 2009, leading websites that promote internet freedom such as the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (www.anhri.net) and the Initiative for an Open Arab Internet (www.openarab.net) posted many items, including the following: in Egypt, harsher measures including solitary confinement have been taken against the jailed blogger Dia Eddin Jad who has been under arrest since February 2008, and other bloggers such as Rami al-Souwasi, Mohamad Adel, Tamer Mabrouk and the famous couple bloggers Manal and Alaa have been arrested on and off; in Oman, the blogger Ali al-Zwaidi has been convicted of breaching the law by posting material on his website raising questions about possible corruption in the state-owned Omantel communication company; in Sudan, the authorities arrested blogger Abed al-Hakim Abed al-Rahman, who posted on his site supportive material to the International Court of Justice decision regarding the arrest of the Sudanese president Omar

al-Bashir in relation with crimes in Darfur; in Bahrain, the authorities harassed Facebook activists and have extended the ban on any websites seen to be critical of the ruling family; in Morocco, a court sentenced the journalist and blogger Hasan Barhoun to six months imprisonment for "publishing and publicising lies;" in Tunisia, state media has launched attacks against Facebook users and demanded the authorities to ban it; in Syria, the authorities banned the website of the Syrian Human Rights Organisation; and in Saudi Arabia, the authorities arrested blogger Humoud bin Saleh, who converted to Christianity and shut down his own blog. These news items from only these two weeks give some glimpses of the current state of the internet in the Arab world. Previous months and years are only an extension of these two weeks. Part of the bleak picture is reflected in a March 2009 report by Reporters Without Borders on the "Enemies of the Internet," which included Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Tunisia among a list of 12 countries that also included Burma, China, North Korea, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam (www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=30543).

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Despite compounded restrictive governmental measures, there are in fact ongoing "internet wars" between authorities and opposition groups in the Arab world. "Internet police" in various forms and names strive hard to keep pace with thousands of newly emerging websites and blogs that invent novel techniques and find leeway to out-manoeuvre increasingly stricter measures. These measures take many forms: direct regulations, mobilisation of public opinion against "terrorist and immoral websites," and coordinated regional plans at the ministerial level. Internet service providers in the Arab world are mostly owned by governments or by government-affiliated or remotely controlled companies. Thus, the gateways to this global sphere are in fact guarded by official authorities deciding what to allow and what to fend off. Most Arab governments justify banning measures on

the grounds of maintaining state security, preserving national unity and safeguarding public morality. These governments exploit the so-called "war on terror" to ban opposition websites or news blogs that criticise their regimes. To market their harsh measures in the public eye authorities always mix such banning of political and oppositional websites with similar banning of pornography and "immoral" websites. Both kinds of websites, political and pornographic, are thus displayed as equally damaging and harmful.

"Talk Shop" or "Sphere of Action"?

Despite all restrictions, surely the internet has provided an avenue for political activism across the Arab world, however limited and with less outreach than is believed. An example of political action in Egypt shows something of this picture. In Egypt during March 2009 all opposition groups attempted to mobilise the public to participate in a nationwide public strike on 6 April. Widespread support was gathered on opposition media and internet blogs behind the "6 April Movement." The page www.manalaa.net, a popular blog run by the couple Manal and Alaa stirring debates on socio-political issues and strongly critical of the regime in Egypt, provides an example of this specific "internet mobilisation." On its homepage a huge poster of the strike is posted, saying "6 April: General Strike for the People of Egypt" signed by "the Youth of 6 April." On both sides of the poster there is one list of "our rights" and another list showing how people could/should participate in the strike, both written in simple vernacular Egyptian dialect. Under the "rights" list are demands against high prices, the succession of the presidency (from President Mubarak senior to his son), brutal police, torture, and corruption. The "strike participation" list asks people not to go to work, university, school, market, or civil service departments. Internet campaigning by many websites of opposition parties to rally Egyptians behind this "general strike," along with all other collective efforts of political groups, did not succeed. The message of protest was delivered by and via blogs and websites wider than any similar attempt in the past. But this slight change in mode of "messaging" yielded but a slighter change in the political reality. The disheartening story of internet failure to revive the "6 April Movement" as a mass protest is in fact only a replica of what could be seen in many Arab countries from

Morocco and Tunisia to Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. The internet blogs and campaigns are merely an auxiliary factor for effecting change and realising freedoms. The hope that internet activity would be a principal agent of political and social change is one thing, the reality is another.

Not all political talk on Arabic-speaking blogs and websites is oppositional in nature, attacking regimes and governments. Numerous internet communication and chatrooms entertain debates and discussions between and within different groups. One of the most popular worldwide voice/video websites is www.paltalk.com, founded in 1998, where there are many chatrooms created by members focusing on specific countries or issues. Clicking on "Middle East" on Paltalk leads to a list of sub-headings of all Arab countries and "themes" with the number of rooms discussing each of these countries or themes shown between brackets, for example Egypt (36), Iraq (23), Morocco (42) and Kuwait (47). Examples of thematic and issue-focused rooms include Business & Technology (23), Community & Family (3), Friends & Relationships (68), Government & Politics (32), Christianity (32), Islam (60) and Adult (27) –checked around 10 a.m. Greenwich Mean Time, 6 April 2009. The "Adult" section chatrooms cover Arab gay and lesbian discussions and intimate debates, and offer networking between Arab homosexuals across Arab countries.

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Debates and concerns that gather more chatters are those relating to Islam, intra-relations with fellow non-Muslim citizens, corruption, and sectarianism mainly along the Sunni-Shiite divide. Discussions about North African issues include identity representations and the language demands of Berbers and Amazigh speakers in Morocco and Algeria. Other ongoing debates develop into fierce mutual attacks between religious groups –Muslims versus Christians

or between Muslim groups. Major issues in the Arab world, such as Palestine, Iraq, and Darfur, are intensely debated between competing partisan supporters. In most of these chatrooms people participate through voice talk, alongside typing, giving discussions a lively atmosphere. Controversial issues and voices that are never heard in any other Arab media outlet are expressed without boundaries. Yet this freedom is exclusive to small groups of active chatters. And although many hot debates have been actively discussed in these rooms for many years it is difficult to gauge their impact outside their virtual world.

Internet Freedom: Agent of Change?

Any examination of compromised media freedoms in the Arab world would in fact necessitate a broader discussion on the situation of all other liberties and their dilemmas: political, social, ethno-cultural and religious. When other agents fail to bring about socio-political and religious freedoms it is easier to resort to the media for help, or even to blame.

The Arab public, with relation to the media, could be seen as comprising four main groups: the ruling elites; the traditional and religious activists and groups; the secular and liberal activists and groups; and the majority of people, who are mostly influenced by traditional value systems. Media freedom, its limitations, and its role represent different meanings, aspirations, consequences, or even threats for each of these groups. Therefore, discussing these freedoms in the Arab world should be approached with the different perceptions of these groups included. The differentiated perceptions of "media freedom" by various social, political and religious groups require a more nuanced analysis. Using the toolbox available in the dichotomy of "ruling elite" versus "ruled" to gauge freedoms and their interrelations within the broader societal context becomes less applicable. In practical terms, any advocacy for internet freedom grounded in the proposition that the "public/ruled" would want unfettered and free internet access against the will of the "ruling elite" is in fact inaccurate. Internet freedom is promoted by its exponents as a means to escape state-controlled media, allowing more space for political action and liberties. But major segments of society would fear this same freedom as the facilitator of an "invasion" of the "corrupt Westernised culture of sex and moral decadence." In Saudi Arabia, for example, the law allows members of the public to lodge

demands to close down websites on moral and religious grounds. A website disliked by a few people could be banned if they complained about it to the authorities. In the Palestinian West Bank where internet regulations are not so strict because Israel controls the main servers, many families protested against internet cafés because of their "moral corrupting influence" on the youth.

i-Islam: Jihadists, *Fatwas*, and Modes of Islamisation

Arabic-speaking religious websites are vast, numerous, very powerful, and wide-ranging. At one end of the spectrum there are websites that promote extreme and violent messages and practices, such as blogs affiliated with al-Qaeda do. Other extreme but non-violent websites promote strict Salafi or other interpretations of Islam such as that of Hizb ut-Tahrir. At the other end of the internet-religiosity there are those websites that advocate official and state-associated modes of Islam. In between these two ends and around them there are thousands of websites that promote different understandings of Islam. All put together, Islamic websites occupy the central area of the Arabic-speaking internet.

One of the areas that these websites are most concerned with is the "*fatwa*," which is a religious ruling issued by a scholar concerning a rising matter or issue to an inquiring person who asks for guidance. Some *fatwas* could be issued by scholars on certain issues without anyone particularly inquiring about it. Historically, the *fatwa* is a socio-religious practice that fulfils the spiritual and religious concerns of many Muslims. By referring to knowledgeable scholars (*ulama*), ordinary Muslims who want to stay committed to religious obligations concede moral power to *ulama* by listening to their views and opinions. *Fatwas* range widely, covering religious, political, social, family, cultural, financial, and even technological matters. Thousands of websites, or parts of websites, are now solely dedicated to *fatwas*.

The most worrying aspect of the *fatwa* practice is its transcendental insinuation into others' lives, even if they are not religiously committed or did not ask for a *fatwa.* For example, a scholar could post a *fatwa* on a popular website prohibiting certain practices, bullying non-religious Muslims to adhere to this specific religious duty. The limits as to where the *fatwa* should refrain from transgressing individual liberties

is indeed one of the formidable questions that faces Islamic thinking nowadays. The amalgamation of undefined religious territories occupied and expanded by Islamist movements, the official religious establishment, and constitutional articles that stipulate Islam and Sharia Law as a principal, or in some cases *the* principal, source of legislation have all created an atmosphere where legitimisation of social behaviour is drawn on religious normativeness. In this process of legitimisation the *fatwa* is in fact the main tool.

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The centrality of the *fatwa* in the socio-religious legitimisation processes is not new; rather it has always been a feature of the role of Sharia in Muslim communities. What *is* new, however, is the modern communication medium, mainly the trans-border television broadcasting and the internet, by which the "*fatwa* institution" has expanded to unprecedented outreaches. Given the status and authority that Islam still enjoys in the Arab world, along with extremely high rates of illiteracy, the power of the *fatwa* has only but multiplied. The Islamisation projects that many religious and Islamist movements have been pursuing over decades have benefited greatly from the new dawn of intensive communication. For this writer, a crucial measure by which we could gauge the success or failure of the Islamisation process is the enhancement of religious references as the underpinnings of normative behaviour in society. The new channels of modern communications have further elevated religion and modes of religiosity promoted by the Islamists to a new "normative and moral" pinnacle. Consequently, other intellectual and ideological worldviews adopted and/or supported by other segments of society have been downgraded as lower in status than the religious ethos, and consequently are seen as decadent, immoral,

westernised and anti-religions. For many years, Islamist media had limited channels on mainstream media to advocate their messages. The space of freedom offered by the internet has opened fresh and broad highways for religious formations not only to advance the Islamisation agenda, but also to dominate the construction of the normative criteria of sociality.

One consequence of the elevated status of religion and religious scholars that the new media has helped to enhance is the overblown sense of paternal responsibility on the part of the *ulama* and religious establishments. To counter waves of "westernisation" and moral decadence, these scholars have launched campaigns against multiple manifestations of sociality that are seen to be un-Islamic. *Fatwas* have flooded thousands of internet websites warning Muslims against endless practices and behaviours. From the minuscule act of how to enter or exit a toilet to such larger-scale foreign issues as the American occupation of Iraq in 2003 or Hezbollah's stance against Israel in summer 2006, *fatwas* have flowed tirelessly advising Muslims on things to do or not to do.

In the pursuit of protecting Muslim societies against "cultural invasions," many *fatwas* have prohibited many "freedoms" on the internet. "Immoral" websites, chatrooms, music channels, and "secular and atheist" homepages have all been targeted by *fatwas*. An angry *fatwa* on one religious website called on "our Muslim hackers brothers" to destroy a website of Arab atheists (www.el7ad.com). Wars between Arab hackers have also become a feature of the Arab internet sphere, mostly against un-Islamic websites, but after the implosion of sectarianism in post-2003 Iraq, many hackers became aligned along the Sunni-Shiite schism. Sunni or Shiite websites that belonged to competing parties or groups, or even un-aligned institutions, would be targeted by the other side. A fierce "hackers" war broke out during and after the Israeli/Hezbollah war in summer 2006 between Hezbollah and other Shiite-affiliated websites on one side and Saudi and Salafi-affiliated websites on the other side.

In conclusion, the impact of internet use in the Arab world and that of all discourses and mobilisation using this medium, including the most powerful religious discourse, remain confined to active circles and those who have access. With the continuity of socio-political authoritarian systems coupled with illiteracy rates and technological poverty, the internet stays on the margin both as a public sphere of freedom and as a venue for political action.