The Promise of New Technologies in the Arab World

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The Promise and Challenge of New Technologies in the Arab World

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Summary

The technological landscape in the Arab world has changed radically in just a few years. Traditionalists, and some government leaders, see this as a threat; but there are others who view it as an opportunity. Militants and reformers alike, along with innovative projects like Ammannet, an Internet radio station in Jordan, are challenging traditional government control over the flow of information to the general public. Satellite and Internet technology has blurred the once clear lines regarding what the media could and could not cover. New technologies may aid the region's reformers, but the process still has a long way to go: On the whole, the Middle East remains one of the least "connected" regions on earth.

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Google the words "Middle East blogs" and a mixed bag of results come up. There are the musings of respected regional experts such as Juan Cole (www.juancole.com), a history professor at the University of Michigan, and Joshua Landis, a professor of Middle East Studies on leave from the University of Oklahoma and now based in Damascus (www.SyriaComment.com).

There also are a depressingly predictable number of ideological ranters – for and against the American war in Iraq, for and against the Israelis, for and against the Palestinians. Many of those with an axe to grind appear to have ties to the region that are tenuous at best.

Then there are the bloggers who actually live in the Middle East, including a surprisingly large number of Iraqis writing in English. These, too, are a mixed bag. On the one hand there is Raghda, a 13-year-old Iraqi girl living in Baghdad who uses her blog (http://baghdadgirl.blogspot.com) mainly to post pictures of cats. Rose (www.rosebaghdad.blogspot.com) is a 28-year-old Iraqi civil engineer, married with a

small daughter. Her diary chronicling the struggle of daily life in today's Iraq recently changed somewhat when she and her husband moved to the United Arab Emirates. An Iraqi named Alaa writes as The Mesopotamian (www.messopotamian.blogspot.com), subtitling his blog: "To bring one more Iraqi voice of the silent majority to the attention of the world," and offering analysis of the ups and downs of the country's emerging political class.

Whatever else may be happening there, Baghdad's on-line community has clearly come a long way from the days immediately before and during the American invasion of 2003 when the mere existence of an Iraqi blogger, writing under the pseudonym "Salam Pax," made headlines around the world.

The Iraqi blogs are unusually visible, but they are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the application of new technology in the Arab World.

Al-Qaeda and its myriad offshoots have long been known for their mastery of web site design and video editing. Recently, the region's pro-democracy reformers have begun to catch up. Within days of the Feb. 14 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, his supporters had created a web site (www.rafikhariri.com) to preserve his memory and mobilize resistance to the Syrian and Lebanese governments, whom many Hariri supporters blamed for his death. In Egypt the Kefiya movement (the name is Arabic for "Enough") has also taken its calls for an end to the regime of President Hosni Mubarak online (www.harakamasria.com). In both cases the web sites are primarily in Arabic, but include English sections designed to mobilize support, or at least sympathy, in the broader international community. The effects of this technological revolution can also be seen in the region's mainstream media. Abdul Hamid Ahmed, editor-in-chief of *Gulf News*, an English-language newspaper published in Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates, says the explosion of satellite and Internet technology around the region over the last seven to ten years has blurred the once clear "red lines" that existed in terms of what the media could and could not cover.

Satellites and the Internet, he says, have made it harder to restrict the flow of information, and governments throughout the region, recognizing this, have loosened their controls. The effect, however, has not been uniformly felt.

"When we take Arab media in general and compare developments in print and satellite media, there is no comparison. Our print media are still weak and need to revolutionize," he said, adding that newspapers remain weak because they are tied to borders in ways television channels and the Internet are not.

Unsurprisingly, not everyone in the Middle East sees this as a good thing. In a speech to his ruling Ba'ath Party in early June, Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad – a man who also serves as founder and president of the Syrian Computer Club – launched a bitter attack on Internet technology and its uses.[i]

The "IT revolution," he said, "has made room for theories and projects as well as lifestyles which have overwhelmed Arabs and threatened their existence and cultural identity, and has increased the doubts and skepticism in the mind of young Arabs."

He went on to paint a portrait of the Internet as a tool of foreign indoctrination, decrying "an illusory virtual reality that inspires our feelings in a way which drives us in a direction identified by others, without us being aware of the reality of what is actually happening. … This leads in the end to the cultural, political and moral collapse of the Arab individual and his ultimate defeat even without a fight."

"The ultimate objective of all this is the destruction of Arab identity; for the enemies of the Arab nation are opposed to our possessing any identity or upholding any creed that could protect our existence and cohesion, guide our vision and direction, or on which we can rely in our steadfastness. They simply aim at transforming us into a negative reactive mass which absorbs everything that is thrown at it without the will or even the possibility of thinking of rejecting or accepting it."

Assad ended this section of his speech with a call for "greater awareness, responsibility and defiance."

At a time when many Arab governments at least pay lip service to the need to catch up with the West technologically, the Syrian president's view of the Internet as something approaching a foreign plot was startling.

Yet perhaps it should not have been. The idea that modern technology represents an assault on Arab identity is not particularly new – when satellite television first appeared in the region in the early 1990s some preachers and journalists in Egypt repeatedly used he words "invasion" and "threat" in describing the new technology. At a more basic level the idea that Western culture represents an existential challenge to Arab identity is one that has surfaced repeatedly in Arab political discourse as far back as 1798, when Napoleon invaded Egypt.

In an interview prior to Assad's speech, Daoud Kuttab, a Palestinian journalist and activist, spoke of a "contradiction that exists in the Arab world." Many of the region's leaders, he notes, seem to have mixed feelings when it comes to information technology.

"You have countries like Jordan, like Morocco and maybe even to a certain degree like Egypt, in which the government basically speaks in two voices. On the one hand they talk about globalization, about the market system, about the IT revolution. [Jordan's] king wants to have the Internet in every school, he wants Jordan to become the hub, he's inviting Bill Gates and others to Jordan – but at the same time, they're still not applying the same enthusiasm to the information, especially the political side of the information revolution. They want the business part of globalization, but they don't want the information part of globalization. They want the e-mail, but they don't want the access to information."

Governments, he says, have essentially given up on denying the rich (who in most Arab countries are an extension of the governing elite) access to IT. They are very concerned, however, about how technology, and the broader access to information it inevitably entails, will affect their hold over the mass of society.

"The gap today is not just between the poor and the rich, but also between those who have access to information and those who don't. The traditional media, the government-

owned radio and TV stations, are basically pumping information to the poor, keeping them ignorant," Kuttab said. The problem for governments is that "young people are growing up quickly. They're using the Internet. They're using SMS [Short Message Service] on their cellphones. I think this divide is narrowing very quickly."

It is a sentiment echoed by Naguib Sawiris, chairman and CEO of Orascom, a Cairo-based company that is the region's largest mobile phone operator.[ii]

"Really, the best thing that's happened to this part of the world is the satellite dishes and the Internet. Because suddenly the people had access to all the information, all the news, and not only access, they also have a way now to communicate to the world," he says.

"Governments who in the past controlled the media are unable to do that right now … So the fact is this technology has really been a big pusher in this part of the world because it has provided access and communication to engage the so-called 'free world' and this part of the world."

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Though best known as one of the region's leading political commentators in both Arabic and English, Kuttab is also one of its high-tech media entrepreneurs. In November 2000 he set up Ammannet (www.ammannet.net), an innovative project that began as both one of the region's first forays into Internet radio, and as a clever attempt to dodge Jordan's restrictive media laws.

Unable to get a license for a private radio station, Kuttab solicited funds from UNESCO and political backing from Amman's mayor to start a small Internet radio station focused on public affairs. To make sure his team's work reached beyond the computer-literate he arranged to have local radio stations in Lebanon and the West Bank download Ammannet's political and social features and broadcast them back into Jordan from outside the country's borders.

 The station is now also available by satellite, and its offerings have grown exponentially.

"We started with one or two feature stories a week, and then we expanded to creating a news bulletin with local programming," he says.

Ammannet has created a web site for every member of the Jordanian parliament, and it gives special attention to the activities of 10 MP's selected to reflect the country's ethnic, religious, geographic and socio-economic mix. Ammannet reporters record these MPs' every vote and speech, comparing their conduct in office with their electoral platforms and posting the results on the web.

All this is possible, Kuttab says, because Jordan's Press & Publications Law does not recognize the Internet as a media format. "Plus, the fact that we are using a server in Europe and in America means that the actual source of publication is not in Jordan. This basically allowed us to work under the radar screen and outside any censorship or control mechanism of the government."

Other programs include "Eye on the Media," which critiques print media in Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine, and broadcast media in Jordan. The show is rebroadcast in those countries, and Ammannet also makes a print version available to editors and journalists.

"Diary of a Refugee" is an oral history project focusing on the oldest Palestinian refugees in Jordan, making their stories available on the Internet. "Haqqi" ("My right") is an EU-funded legal awareness program produced in cooperation with Jordan's second-largest newspaper, *Ad-Doustour*. Each week a legal expert answers questions by e-mail, phone and letter. A transcript of each broadcast is both posted on the Internet and reprinted in the newspaper. There is also, of course, an IT program ("IT in Arabic").

Finally, Ammannet trains other journalists from around the region in both its editorial and its technological approach, sending them home with an open-source software package that will allow them to start up an Internet radio station on their own.

"All they have to do is buy a domain name, find the hosting, and then start broadcasting," says Kuttab.

The cost for all of this? Ammannet costs about $100,000 annually, Kuttab says, a figure which supports around 20 full and part-time staff and a small office suite in central Amman.

When holding previously unaccountable power up to public scrutiny can be done this cheaply, it is difficult to avoid the thought that projects like Ammannet – and not an influx of Western movies and television shows – may be what Bashar Assad really had in mind during his attack on the Internet.

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In some ways government paranoia is misplaced. The Arab world remains among the least "connected" regions on earth with just 18 computers per 1,000 people, against a global average of 78.3 according to the 2003 Arab Human Development Report, a project of the United Nations Development Programme. Regionwide, only 1.6 percent of Arabs have any Internet access at all,[iii] though the access rate varies significantly from country to country and is predictably highest in the oil states of the Gulf and lowest in poor countries such as Yemen and Sudan where illiteracy remains high.

Some governments are seeking to change this – Jordan wants all schools to have high-speed Internet access, and Egypt's new prime minister recently launched an initiative to put computers, eventually, in every home in the country (using low-cost PC's that are assembled locally and paid for in installments through the customer's telephone bill) and to make dial-up Internet access available for minimal cost.

But there remains a long, long way to go. GDP per capita (adjusted for U.S. purchasing power parity) in Egypt, the region's most populous country, is only $4,200. In Yemen and the West Bank the figure is $800.[iv]

Naguib Sawiris, chairman of the mobile phone operator Orascom, offers praise for the Egyptian government's initiatives to broaden Internet access, tempered by a sober realization of just how far the country still has to go. "The income of the people is really minimal. Therefore, they have to first satisfy the necessities of life – food, school –

before they can go out and buy a PC or a laptop," he says. "In Egypt, for example, you have only 1 million (Internet) subscribers, maybe, through the end of last year … One million, versus 70 million inhabitants in Egypt. It's less than one-and-a-half percent!"

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When Sawiris and Kuttab look to the future, both see promise in the region's young people.

Almost every country in the Arab world has an unusually young population. According to the United Nations, 37 percent of Arab nationals are under the age of 15, compared with 21.6 percent in the United States. In some countries the figures are even higher: Saudi Arabia 39.1 percent, the Palestinian Territories 46.1 percent, Yemen 48.7 percent.[v]

And for younger Arabs SMS messaging has emerged as, perhaps, the most widely used of the region's new technologies.

Throughout the Middle East teenagers and 20-somethings use SMS messages on their mobile phones to chat with each other via the region's numerous satellite music video channels. "*Im Hind min Tunis Im 22 hi Tarek ana sadika la belle*", read a message one recent afternoon, scrolling across the bottom of the screen on Mazzika, a Cairo-based music video channel. The note's mix of English, French and transliterated Arabic is fairly common (it translates roughly as: "I'm Hind from Tunisia. I'm 22. Hi to Tarek, I'm your beautiful friend") as is the omission of punctuation marks.

Text messages can be sent in both Arabic and Latin script, and the on-screen chat lines are available in both formats, scrolling across the bottom of television screens on every youth-oriented television channel in the region.

In conservative societies where meeting young people of the opposite sex can be difficult, these services are understandably popular. "Rima: any nice guy from ksa?" read one recent note, "ksa" being the common abbreviation for "Kingdom of Saudi Arabia." The supposed anonymity of the chat lines makes possible otherwise socially unacceptable

contact among young people. All of the Arab stations broadcasting on-screen chats use software that, in theory, catches and blocks messages containing strings of numbers to prevent young people from exchanging phone numbers. The software is not, however, foolproof and most any Arab teen can tell you how to trick it.

Beyond the music video channel chat lines, companies use SMS messages to run contests, Al-Jazeera uses them to distribute news updates, TV viewers use them to vote for the winners of popular reality and game shows.

One reason the technology is so popular is that it is clearly profitable, a fact which gives television channels and service providers an incentive to push it at every opportunity. According to Jawad Abbassi, founder of Arab Advisors Group, an Amman-based telecommunications consulting company, fees for SMS voting have meant the difference between profit and loss for both Future Television and LBC, Beirut-based satellite channels that are seen throughout the region. "What helped them a lot was the interactivity," he said. "If you will, the marriage of cellular and satellite TV."

Normal SMS messages cost only a few pennies. Using the technology to chat on a music video channel or vote on "Superstar," the Arab version of "American Idol" costs a lot more.

"The telephone operator gets a cut. The intermediary providing the software solution – the voting system, if you will – gets a cut, and the TV station gets a cut. Usually no less than 30 to 40 percent," Abbassi said. "Each vote on 'Superstar' gets them 10 cents or so. And you get 2 million or 3 million votes" in the final rounds of each competition.

Sawiris, as a mobile phone operator, readily agrees. Along with things like Internet voting, the downloading of music and ringtones is now, he says, a significant source of revenue. "In these markets the ARPU, which is average revenue per user per month, is something between $7 and $10," he says. So "even if it's $1 per month per user it's 10 percent of the usage."

As ubiquitous as SMS technology appears to be as one walks down a street in Amman, Dubai or Cairo, Abbassi, of Arab Advisors, says his surveys show that "use of interactivity in Egypt and in Jordan is very low. When we surveyed a lot of people, there are less than one or two percent actually using them occasionally." Even in Saudi Arabia, he said, the figure reached only 11 percent. So there remains huge room for commercial growth, and for all the ramifications of expanded communications.

And that, according to Sawiris, is why the technology will not go away – whatever the Syrian president might wish – and why it has the potential to serve as an enabler of reform. "Right now they're striving, and trying to find out who's the bad guy sending these e-mails. But there's nothing they can do about it," he said, adding: "Governments have to change in this part of the world. There's no argument about that."

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About the Middle East Media Project: The USC Center on Public Diplomacy Middle East Media Project is funded by a grant from the Schumann Center for Media and Democracy. The project examines core issues at the intersection of media and public diplomacy in the Middle East. It aims to answer the following questions: How do the Arab and western media interact and perceive each other? How are U.S. foreign policy goals promoted to and perceived by people in the Middle East? And most importantly, what sort of new initiatives could be effective in deepening mutual understanding between the Arab and western worlds?

Notes

[i] President Bashar Al-Assad, address to the 10th Ba'ath Party Congress, Damascus, June 6, 2005. Quotes are from the official English translation of President Assad's remarks distributed to journalists at the event.

[ii] Orascom operates mobile telephone networks in Egypt, Algeria, Pakistan, Tunisia, the Republic of Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe, Iraq and Bangladesh with a total of about 15 million subscribers. It used to operate networks in Jordan, Yemen and Ivory Coast but has sold those holdings.

[iii] "Arab Human Development Report 2003: Building a Knowledge Society," United Nations Development Program, p. 22. The report is available online at: http://www.rbas.undp.org/ahdr.cfm

[iv] CIA World Factbook (http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/); Egypt and Yemen figures are for 2004, West Bank 2003.

[v] All figures are for 2002. Source: United Nations Development Programme statistical tables, available online at: http://hdr.undp.org/statistics/data/indic/indic_44_1_1.html