PEER REVIEW ARTICLE

From A-List to Webtifada: Developments in the

Lebanese Blogosphere 2005-2006

Witnessing the war that engulfed Lebanon in 2006 from the outside was disturbing and frustrating. In the midst of bombing and large-scale displacement of Lebanese civilians, information was hard to get. For people like me with friends and interest in Lebanon, the blogosphere soon became an indispensable addition to the daily dose of BBC and Lebanese media. Blogs simply became the medium of choice for many people outside of Lebanon who wanted to follow and understand the conflict. For Lebanese and other people in Lebanon, blogging offered a unique way to share and discuss their war experience. The war sent the international blogosphere into frantic action and filled chat rooms and postings with heated debate. According to the international blog search engine Technorati, key words during the conflicts, such as Hizbullah and Qana[1] were among the very most requested on the Internet. The blogosphere became not just a space for debate but also for information and alternative views and accounts from the ground, which during previous conflicts in the Middle East has been the privilege of satellite channels. If the first Gulf War in 1991 was CNN's baptism of fire and the Afghan Invasion in 1998 Al Jazeera's, the Lebanon War in 2006 has propelled Internet-based journalism, which first appeared during and after the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, from obscurity to the heart of the new Arab public sphere of transnational media.[2]

The Lebanon War therefore makes an interesting sampler for wider trends in Middle Eastern blogging and new media. Through a critical discourse analysis of Lebanese blogs from their first stirrings during the "Independence Intifada" of 2005 to the Lebanon War in 2006, this article addresses some of the key concerns in sociological inquiry into new media.[3] Does blogging facilitate rational discourse, respect for opposite opinions and pursuit of the best argument? Can blogs challenge the social authority of old media and in particular the press? If blogs are related to the crafting of new speech genres in other "young" media like mobile phones and emails, what does this new form of expression tell us about social cleavages in the Middle East? To what extent are blogs bourgeois, intellectual properties and to what extent do they reflect non-elite perspectives? And what, if anything, do blogs have to do with democratisation?

Interactive Media and Blogs in the Middle East

Blogs are part of a new generation of media which are slowly but steadily changing media habits in the West and other parts of the world in ways that some people think will be revolutionary.[4] These media are characterised by their interactive nature. Whereas "old" mass media as we have known them since Gutenberg invented the print press in 1448 are based on mass mediation of a centrally formulated cultural product, these media actively involve the public. Interaction between readers, listeners and viewers has been known for some time from opinion pages, call-in radio programs and a range of popular TV shows based on the idea of selection or election. However, the invention of the Internet has added another dimension to interactivity by rendering the new generation of media multi-centric. The new media include interactive net-journalism, where newspapers let their readers write or influence part of the content, the

net-encyclopaedia Wikipedia and other user-editable databases or "wikis," and

podcasting, which refers to Internet users' own compilation of radio programs. In a way

blogs are "so 2004."[5] New forms of interactive media like "vlogs" (video logs) and

podcasts with better and faster forms of interactivity keep appearing. But at the same

time, the blogosphere keeps expanding faster than any other new media sphere,

particularly in parts of the world with limited access to the latest technology.[6]

By way of a brief definition, a blog is a home page where the author regularly produces

new texts and links readers to other blogs and sites of interest. It is easy to become a

blogger. All one needs is a computer, an Internet connection and the right software

which can be downloaded for free. The topic of a blog can be anything from a scientific

discussion to news, political propaganda or fan culture, but it is the blog resembling a

traditional diary or log of personal thoughts and experiences which has given Web logs

their name. The number of blogs has grown exponentially since 2003. Today there are

around 30 million blogs and every second a new one is created. Most bloggers are based

in Europe, the US and the Far East, and use their blogs in very localised ways, such as to

exchange gossip, music and films with close friends.[7]

In the Middle East, blogs are less common due to the relatively small number of

Internet users.[8] But the low numbers belie their importance. In the last three years Arab

bloggers critical of their governments have been subjected to prosecution and

imprisonment in Syria, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Bahrain, Egypt and Tunisia.[9] The increased

surveillance by governments reflects their concern that in hands of savvy users, blogs

can be very efficient political tools. Indeed, a relatively large number, if not the

majority, of bloggers in the Middle East seem to be politically motivated. Many write in

English, the lingua franca of the blogosphere, although considerable blogospheres exist in Persian, Hebrew and, to a lesser extent, in Arabic. We will return to the significance of the preponderance of English on Arab and particularly Lebanese blogs. For now, it is worth noting that using English rather than Arabic allows bloggers to communicate with international human rights groups, media, researchers, and, most importantly, a community of other bloggers worldwide.

The most famous Middle Eastern blogger is probably Salam Pax, whose diary from Baghdad before, during and after the 2003 American-led invasion was printed in *The Guardian* and later published as a book. Iraq and Iran are home to some of the most active blogospheres, emanating inside and outside the countries, but blog pioneers like Salam Pax have also inspired a growing number of bloggers in other Arab countries, notably Egypt and Lebanon.[10]

In most Arab countries, blogs are still restricted to the middle and upper class. Symptomatically, Salam Pax was no "man in the street," but the son of a high-ranking politician. On one hand, blogging can be seen as one among several means of expression for a politically active segment of the Arab middle classes who find it increasingly feasible to protest against the lack of democracy and freedom of speech in their countries. But it would be reductive to only look at blogging in an analytical framework of democratisation. Blogs have also created a medium through which the many Arabs living in the West can establish direct links with their home countries, generating a new realm for Arab transnationalism; they have given an outlet to the generation between fifteen and thirty five who have traditionally had limited access to the public sphere; and they have introduced a whole new speech genre, which challenges cultural, social and

political norms.[11] Each of these perspectives will be explored further in the analysis of

Lebanese blogs.

Correct speech and differentiated speech

It is hard to find a metaphor that describes this new form of journalism and public

debate. Blogs resemble opinion pages, but with minimal editorial filtering. Another

qualitative difference between the print press and blogs lies in the speech modes

employed. Blogs are dialogical in the true sense of the word, allowing not just for a

response, but a quick sequence of responses and ensuing dialogues that extend to other

user groups and media. They are snappy, filled with codes, abbreviations and cultural

references. And unlike the heavily edited realm of newspapers, blogs facilitate informal

and "incorrect" speech as well as formal speech genres. I will suggest here that this ability

to play with speech genres is the precise reason why comparisons to old media and the

cultural theories—such as the work of Jürgen Habermas—that accompanied their

emergence in the period of high modernity ultimately yield very little insight into the

actual workings of Internet media.[12]

The reason why many people look for similarities between new and old media

could be related to an undying techno-optimism inherent in modernisation theory,

according to which electronic media are part of a development designed to "expand" the

public sphere and further democratisation.[13] In the Middle East perhaps more than

anywhere else, the advent of global mass media in the last fifteen years has been

accompanied by a strong belief in their potential to create open debate, break with old

taboos and threaten undemocratic regimes.[14] Contrary to these optimistic predictions,

transnational media have become part of political culture in Arab countries without any

demonstrable revolutionary consequences on political institutions.[15] Satellite TV and increased press freedom have created increased diversity of Arab public debate and new venues for critical intellectuals, but have failed to generate enough trust between intellectuals, the media and the regimes to make them influential in policy making.[16]

With the arrival of a new generation of media, we should be wary of joining the band-wagon of the old techno-determinism. There is no doubt that free media have in the past contributed to creating open societies in various parts of the world. But they do not do so automatically. Just like newspapers and satellite channels, blogs depend on production, consumption and organised civil society to transform any critical discourse into political action. Besides, expectations of media's ability to create rationality comport with an implied, often unarticulated, political agenda to keep Arabs and Muslims typecast as irrational. Such expectations become particularly problematic when compared to the prominent role that religion, superstition, corruption and lies actually play in Western media and politics. The blogosphere is a remarkably free social space where opinions and arguments range from the very well informed to the ridiculous. Therefore blogs can inform, enlighten and further understanding between people, but they can also simply regurgitate popular superstition, fear and conspiracy theories. More importantly, they can be seen as playful realms of negotiation for national, social and gender stratifications. This freedom of expression can seem threatening to traditional social institutions, from Islamic authorities to traditional media and cultural elites. In Iran, for example, a debate about blogging (in which bloggers as well as the Iranian press participated) highlighted widespread concern that blogs undermine everything from standards of writing to principles of logical reasoning.[17]

Implied in this critique is a nostalgia for a controlled or previleged space of "correct" Kantian discourse. This nostalgia or aspiration is central to Habermas' idea of a democratic public sphere shared by those who espouse normative theory on the public sphere and hold a hapless reality up against it.[18] As James Bohman explains, proponents of normative theory stress that a public sphere that is of demonstrable democratic import should enable speakers to express their views to others who in turn respond and raise their own opinions and concerns.[19] In addition, this idealized democratic public sphere shows a commitment to communicative freedom and equality. Speakers and audiences treat each other with equal respect and freely exchange roles in their responses to each other. The exchange is guided by an expectation shared by all parties that interlocutors interpret the arguments of speakers solely with a view to establishing the truth. This is "correct" speech action in an idealized democratic public sphere.

The problem with normative theory is that it does not help us understand why and how actual communication plays out in the public sphere. Mikhael Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia or differentiated speech is better suited to explain the playful dimension of blogs.[20] Bakhtin described the complex stratification of language into social speech genres determined by age, region, economic position, kinship and other factors. These genres or voices bring with them associations of everyday speech as well as more formalised authoritative voices. Because all speech genres are related hierarchically, dialogical interaction brings voices and meanings into play, with potentially position-altering effects. However, different mediated realms privilege different speech genres. My point here is to show that blogs have created a new medium which privileges "slack" or "play" between speech genres and their associated social authority to a much greater extent than previous generations of media. The language and outlook of Arab youths in particular are

likely to gain from the undermining of social hierarchies. While this is an exiting

development with potentially significant effects on the formation of social and cultural

identity in the Middle East, we should be wary of overstretching this analysis beyond blog

user communities and predicting a "media revolution" that the evidence does not sustain.

The birth of a Lebanese blogosphere

The size and potential for mass communication today demolishes the ideal

Habermasian coffeehouse. No metaphors, sociological or otherwise, can do the

possibilities of the World Wide Web justice, simply because it is unlike any previous

medium. By viewing it as a variation of existing print media and national public spheres,

one misses the point that it has opened up a "space of spaces" or "public of publics" that

may interact with each other and with existing public spheres but that is essentially

decentred and largely unregulated.[21] This does not mean that the Internet is completely

fluid or unbounded. Rather, a number of social and linguistic criteria and codes divide

what initially seems like limitless cyberspace into manageable forums the boundaries of

which are defined by its user groups.

Internet-based media like blogs today compliment and intersect with existing

national and transnational media. At the same time, the Internet creates new forms of

transnational communication, new communities and new affinities for Muslims and other

Arabs.[22] Blogs in particular have created a new social space where authority is tested

through a play of voices and argumentation. A case in point is Lebanon, where the murder

of Rafiq Al Hariri in February 2005 and the ensuing mass demonstrations known in

Lebanon as the *Intifadat Al Istiqlal* (the Independence Intifada) and in the West as the

Cedar Revolution kick-started a large number of blogs about Lebanese politics and

society and effectively gave birth to a Lebanese blogosphere. Prior to Al Hariri's

assassination, there were very few blogs about and from Lebanon. In the period between

February 2005 and June 2005 several hundred blogs were created, the majority of them as

a direct result of the boom in civil activism that characterised the uprisings in the spring of

2005. The need to understand and discuss what was happening in their homeland

prompted many Lebanese abroad to create blogs, which quickly began to enter into

discussion about Lebanon's political thaw or lack of it. Also non-Lebanese and people

outside of Lebanon joined in the discussion, making the Lebanese blogosphere truly

transnational.

These blogs offered an alternative to the traditional press and TV coverage.

Compared to news coverage and editorials, blog postings were longer, more detailed,

often more spontaneous and slanderous, and very often a lot more entertaining. During

the Independence Intifada, blogs ensured that a wider variety of opinions, including

crude cultural superiority and even racism, were on offer in the public sphere.[23]

Lebanese bloggers offered diversity of opinion and idiosyncratic voices for those who

logged on. Their blogs acted as a "counterpublic" of alternative voices characterised by

the use of more direct and informal speech genres than those employed in political

discourse and in traditional media. Bloggers would bring anything from home pages,

political speeches, a conversation they had with their cousin who happened to be a

Hizbullah supporter, and any other interesting opinion or piece of information that they

had come across, into the discussion of the ongoing political events. At the same time,

bloggers interacted with the traditional public sphere by quoting the Lebanese press and

television programs. This allowed for a more flexible, multi-vocal and informal

discussion of political issues than that offered by traditional media. Small, chatty

postings or long, academic articles were followed by comments and responses from

other bloggers and readers, which were in turn followed by repartees, conversations,

links.

For long-term observers of Lebanon, the result of this new hybrid form of public

opinion, analysis and journalism elicited a deeply interesting debate about central topics

in Lebanon's past and present. However, the equation between blogs and public opinion,

or even "the true voices of the Arab street" as some journalists have dubbed them,

should be taken with a grain of salt and certainly not mistaken for democratisation in

any institutional sense of the word.[24] The Lebanese blogosphere as it emerged in 2005

was not a platform for "the Lebanese people," but for educated commentators. At the

same time, blogs did widen the margin for political commentary and social critique by

drawing in younger people with less established opinions than those normally seen in

the Lebanese media. It may even have broken a monopoly of middle aged journalists on

shaping public opinion. Certainly, the Lebanese blogosphere has created new and vital

linkages between diaspora groups and Lebanon, and between academia and the press.

Although some Lebanese blogs date back to the early 2000s, the appearance of

an actual Lebanese blogosphere with internal debate and wide readership was a direct

result of the Independence Intifada.[25] Some early blogs were administered by young

protagonists in the popular demonstrations that filled Martyr's Square in Beirut and

exiles with close connections to the demonstrators, while others were run by established

commentators associated with the academic world, the media or political institutions

whose interests extended beyond Lebanon. A few of the key voices deserve mention.

As'ad AbuKhalil, Middle East scholar at California State University, Stanislaus, is "the

Angry Arab." His blog Angry Arab News Service contains commentaries on all of the

Middle East but particularly Palestine and Lebanon (see also Will Ward's article in this

issue for analysis of AbuKhalil).[26] The postings are often brief, sarcastic quips on events

in Arab politics and media, but the site also contains art, poetry and comments on

American policies in the Middle East. AbuKhalil is known as the "über" leftist of the

Middle East (studies) blogosphere. His analyses during and after the Independence

Intifada tended to be highly critical of Christian politicians, the Hariri family and others

seen to be colluding with the West.

Although often derided by Lebanese bloggers, AbuKhalil is widely read for his

own readings of the Lebanese and Arab press. In addition, he can take pride in being a

lone voice in the Lebanese blogosphere, persistently critiquing the Independence

Intifada and its leaders. Most other bloggers appearing on the scene in 2005 were

younger than AbuKhalil (who is 45 years old) and sympathised with the demonstrators

on March 14 2005 and the so-called "March 14" alliance of Christian, Druze and Sunni

politicians. One example is Lebanese Bloggers, a blogger collective composed of

Lebanese in their twenties writing from Beirut, the US and the UK.[27] Similar popular

blogs in this category include Beirut Spring and Lebanese Political Journal.[28] Apart from

discussions about topics such as Lebanon's sectarian system, the ailing Lebanese

economy, the Hariri family and Hizbullah, Lebanese identity was a recurrent issue on

these "centrist" blogs during and after the Independence Intifada. Some of these blogs

specialised in cultural issues and some wrote about life in exile, but by far the greatest

number tackled regional and Lebanese politics.[29] In this genre, Across the Bay and From

Beirut to Beltway are still among the most well written and widely quoted blogs.[30] Both

are written by Lebanese in the US, and both are diametrically opposed to the leftist

critique of As'ad AbuKhalil, who they accuse of being overly focused on Western "neo-

colonialism" rather than critiquing the neglect of Arab governments (see also Vivian

Salama's article on Arab American Bloggers in this issue). Although many younger

bloggers may agree with AbuKhalil's secular ideals, they made it clear in their postings

that they have no time for political correctness. They regard AbuKhalil as "a hypocrite

[who] kills us with the Edward Said anti-essentialization argument but insists on some

essentialized core of Lebanese identity," in the words of Tony Badran of Across the

Bay.[31]

Like many other Lebanese bloggers, Badran is just as interested in Syria and the

wider Middle East as in Lebanon and participates in what could be called the Middle

East studies blogosphere.[32] Since 2005, Across the Bay has become essential reading for

many Middle East analysts. The same can be said about its political opponent, Syria

Comment, written by American Middle East scholar and Syria connoisseur Joshua

Landis.[33] Landis is often accused by anti-regime activists of pleading the Syrian

government's cause. None the less, his analyses are always well informed and widely

read by journalists and academics. Even if one disagrees with AbuKhalil, Badran and

Landis, their blogs inform and enlighten, not only by their own postings, but by the way

they tune in to the general debate by quoting Arab and Western media and by linking to

interesting sites and, not least, interesting blogs. They are part of an "A-list" of Lebanese

bloggers who are widely read and quoted. Crucially, they posses an essential skill

required for survival in the blogosphere, namely sharp, identifiable opinions.

One can be on trial in the blogosphere. But in order to sustain a membership, one must continue producing good work. In that respect blogging is no different than a real journalistic career. Just like journalists depend on readers who are willing to buy their opinions, bloggers only become part of the linked-up blogosphere if other bloggers quote them and readers leave comments. Although publishing on the Internet is free, it still in many ways resembles the market of print media. Many of the blogs that emerged out of the Independence Intifada did not manage to market themselves as sharply as the "A-list." Their postings were not quoted sufficiently to become part of the ongoing debate and either stayed in very confined circles—to the effect that only friends left comments—or were eventually put on the back burner. In early 2006, a year after the end of the Independence Intifada, the bloggers keeping the discussion going were almost exclusively Beirut and US-based academics or university students, whose blogging activity often worked as an extension of other work as policy analysts, activists or teachers, which in turn was reflected in their reader groups of students, Middle East analysts, journalists and other bloggers.

A quick glance over the profiles of Lebanese bloggers proves that the blogosphere is not "the voice of the street" but rather a privileged space for young, Anglophone, with-it students and professionals. Out of the approximately three hundred Lebanese blogs listed by the search-engine Technocrati and the blog Lebanon Heart Blogs in September 2006, the blog profiles revealed that 232 were written by university students or young professionals based in Lebanon, Europe, America and Canada.[34] This pattern corresponds with studies of the formation of similar user groups on the Internet. Despite some truth to the myth that "anyone can be a blogger" and that the blogosphere therefore is a uniquely democratic space, socio-economic factors effectively favour

academics, journalists and certain other professions. Personal networks and "A-lists" of bloggers also influence who gains attention. Literacy, access to computers, language, knowledge and cultural capital more generally, as well as the time commitment required if one is to build reputation and integrate oneself into online debate time, all serve to skew the distribution of those involved in blogging.[35]

Webtifadas and mudslinging in the 2006 War

During the July war between Israel and Hizbullah and the Israeli bombardment of Lebanon, Lebanese blogs made a return to form and again became many Internet users' favourite medium for debate and coverage of the events in Lebanon (see also Will Ward's article on bloggers and mass media coverage of the war). Just like in the spring of 2005, the latest crisis in Lebanon created a surge of interest and activity in the blogosphere, underlining its unique potential for direct, interactive grass-roots journalism. This time the human stakes were higher and public interest more profound. As a result, the Lebanese blogosphere expanded dramatically, particularly inside Lebanon, where hundreds of new blogs were launched. Many of them were urged by desperation and the need to communicate. During the worst bombardments blogs played a role similar to that played by the popular radio host Sharif Al Akhawi whose reports in the 1970s and 1980s explained to civilians which roads were safe to take and which were treacherous due to shelling in the Lebanese civil war.[36]

Blogs are primarily spread by the modern word-of-mouth that is emailing. In the flurry of emails circulating between friends of Lebanon and Lebanese during the 2006

war, new blogs would regularly be quoted and recommended. Everybody had their own

favourites. Readers of the Daily Star, and particularly the net-savvy journalists, activists

and academics in the ex-pat circles around Beirut's English-language paper, privileged

blogs such as Siege of Lebanon, where Daily Star staff writers Sonja Knox, Jim Quilty

and Ramsay Short produced some fine pieces of war journalism.[37] Others read the blogs

of friends and acquaintances in Lebanon, which would in turn inspire them to read other

blogs recommended or quoted on those pages. Some blogs, like artist Mazen Kerbaj's

Kerblog, dealt in very personal descriptions of life under siege, in his case through high-

quality drawings and cartoons.[38] Others worked as outlets for relief organisations.[39]

Judging from the number of times they were linked on other blogs, syndicates of writers

like July 2006 War on Lebanon, Lebanese Bloggers (one of the most durable

Independence Intifada blogs), and Electroniclebanon (launched during the war as part of

the Electronic Intifada site dedicated to information and debate about Palestine) were

among the most popular blogs.[40] Particularly individual bloggers with existent networks

who ensured them publicity on the Internet, like writer and curator Rasha Salti whose

Siege Notes made for compelling reading, became widely used gateways to the conflict.[41]

Salti painted a panoramic picture of life in Beirut, of empty streets and huddled refugees,

of broken lives and general confusion. In one posting, she reported "almost live" from

Beirut cafes:

> I have been in the café for one hour now. This is what I have heard so far: A text message traveled
>
> to my friend's cell phone: A breaking news item from Israeli military command. If Hizballah does
>
> not stop shelling Galilee and northern towns, Israel will hit the entire electricity network of
>
> Lebanon. Hizballah shells Haifa, Safad and colonies in south Golan. A text message traveled to my
>
> other friend's cell phone, from an expatriate who left for Damascus and is catching a flight back to
>
> London. "All flights out of Damascus are canceled. Do you know anything?" An Israeli shell fell
>
> near the house of the bartender. His family is stranded in the middle of rubble in Hadath. He leaps

out of the café and frantically calls to secure passage for them to the mountains. Hizballah claims

to down an F-16 Israeli plane near Hadath, bringing slight jubilation to a café that thrives on

denial.[42]

The above quote illustrates how far discussions in real as well as virtual cafés are

from Habermasian "rational discourse." During conflict, confusion, fears, rumours,

intimacies and strategies invariably shape public interaction. There is no guarantee for

mutual respect between antagonists when life is at stake. Some people lie, while others

specialise in ridiculing the other side's viewpoints. Within these limits, three forms of

discursive interaction on blogs are possible. First, blogs can become spaces for

"mudslinging" between opposite viewpoints which meet without approaching each other

with respect or engaging in rational discourse. Second, blogs can become "cleansed"

spaces for agreement and propaganda. Finally, they can become tempered spaces where

opposite viewpoints argue rationally, not necessarily reaching agreement but at least

engaging in critical and respectful discourse. All three scenarios could be observed during

the war.

The comments section on blogs, which enables readers to leave comments and

discuss the issues raised in a posting, is where most of the mud was slung. These

dialogues can be sequences of up to several hundred comments. Tensions often ran high

between Lebanese supporters and critics of Hizbullah. But the ultimate test of the

blogosphere's ability to create a space for opposite opinions to see "face to face" was the

clash of Israeli and Lebanese commentators on blogs like Lebanese Bloggers. In the first

week of the war, the two sides were still able to share their analyses and agree to disagree.

But as the death toll of civilian Lebanese started to mount, a profound gap opened up, and

conversation became nearly impossible. In one instance, Israelis applauded a critical post

by the writer Raji on Hassan Nasrallah. Lebanese commentators responded sharply and

the comments page quickly degenerated into mudslinging over who was to blame for the

war.[43] By the second week of the war, Israeli-Lebanese "debate" on most blogs had

become accusations peppered with racist remarks, and eventually some blog moderators

chose to close their comments page temporarily.

Even in times of relative peace, comments pages often appear as the "pleb" of the

blogosphere for those who favour shouting matches over arguments and debate. Whereas

there are restrictions on who can find the time to write blogs, anyone with Internet access

can log in, read an entry and leave a comment. The comment section is therefore often

more open to idiosyncratic rants. Particularly very opinionated blogs like The Angry Arab

News Service routinely attract angry commentary. Although blogs do create interaction of

opposite views, the result is far from always rational dialogue. The war in Lebanon

certainly did not increase the prospects of respectful discourse. Rather, it furthered

propagandistic tendencies and often created situations where bloggers and commentators

would lob accusations at opponents.

More tempered ways of disagreement also exist. Some ridicule the other's

standpoint, expose their double standards or cite authoritative voices against them.

Citations, as Jon Alterman has noted, play an increasingly important role in political

debates about the Middle East taking place on the Web. Wide access to translations from

Arab media makes it easy for anyone to cut, paste and quote out of context in support of

whichever argument.[44] In Alterman's view, the Internet is "democratising" expertise on

the Middle East. More importantly, quotations play a key role in the way bloggers argue.

The rationality of an argument is often constructed around quotes or hyperlinks to other

entries on the same blog or elsewhere on the Internet. By positioning his or her blog in a

dialogical relationship with other texts, bloggers often seek to establish an authoritative

voice or ridicule opponents. These voices, and the links that connect the reader to them,

are almost exclusively based on texts on the Internet. Most Lebanese bloggers use quotes

to ridicule, and there is a whole sub-genre of sarcastic blogs which reflect the general

cynicism of the young generation towards Lebanese politics in the aftermath of the

Independence Intifada.[45] Postings on blogs like Jamal's Propaganda Site often amount to

a sweeping social critique of sectarianism and the role the Lebanese have themselves

played in their country's malaise, thus undermining official nationalist discourses. For

example, consider this funny take on a rant commonly heard in Lebanon against *hal-balad*

(this country):

> Hal Balad" is the most bitched about thing around here. This expression is always used in a
>
> culpatory tone. Whenever you need to highlight a flaw in this country, and we have a handful of
>
> those around, you blame it all on "Hal Balad." You cant' find a job in "Hal Balad."...People in "Hal
>
> Balad" are full of crap..."Hal Balad" is all about corruption...The humidity in "Hal Balad" is
>
> unbearable... I hate thee people that use this expression. Not because of your incessant whining,
>
> nor because of your criticism of my beloved country, but for the helpless guilt free victim image
>
> that you have of yourself." Hal Balad" is nothing but a reflection of your sorry ass. You pass your
>
> sense of irresponsibility to those you empower to roam free with no worry of accountability. Then
>
> there are those who romanticize "Hal Balad" and fantacize about "Hal Balad" from afar. Sure you
>
> all love "Hal Balad", the summer vacation one night stand kind of love, that is why you abandon it
>
> at the drop of a Dirham. "Hal Balad" is not your Balad. Your "Hal Balad" is a farce. "Hal Balad"
>
> today is bleeding, almost dead. I say we finish it off and bury it deep. Let's build our Lebanon
>
> instead.[46]

Here, criticism of Lebanon is turned on its head and becomes criticism of the Lebanese. Jamal (in the blogosphere since September 2005) is part of a new group of bloggers that emerged after the end of the Independence Intifada. The July War has added a whole new undergrowth of blogs which, although less prolific than the well-argued, regularly updated, tightly interconnected first generation, mark an important transition in the Lebanese blogosphere. As the war went into its second week, bombings intensified and Lebanon was closed off from the outside world by an air and sea blockade, a range of smaller blogs run by people without a large network started to emerge. The new additions include art blogs, new blogger collectives, very personal blogs and blogs written in Arabic.[47] These blogs were fuelled by the urge to speak out and describe what was happening, and to engage in a collective movement of cyber-resistance or "webtifada." Artist Mazen Kerbaj's first postings illustrate the sense of desperation that prompted people to log on to the blogosphere:

> 2 years of lazyness before starting this blog. i'll begin then by thanking israel who burned in one night two years of efforts to avoid getting myself trapped in this adventure. good job guys! especially the airport party. and the bridges. no way to leave the country. nothing else to do than this blog. after all, we all need sometimes a valid reason to start to work, and a good old war soundscape is ok as a starting point (…) this concept of webtifada (the word is not form me. i insist)seems to have some appeal. as you might all know, my brain is not functioning to its full capacity these days. i have no idea of what to do. but despite my legendary skepticism, i feel we can do something with all these people around the world connected to the net. i do not know if petitions work. i usually do not sign them and believe in them. maybe there is a better idea. i do not know. it is really YOU who have to make this webtifada works. i'll continue posting about this issue to give place in the comments section for some ideas to come out. i want this site to be use as a catalyst because it is draging a lot of people. a lot of people that seems to begin to understand that lebanon is not a desert with people on camels worrying all day long where to find water to drink. i'll continue doing my job. please try to start yours.

WE FUCKING RESIST. as we can.

An interesting aspect of this posting is its informality (no capital letters, spelling mistakes, slang) and "unliterary" semblance of speech also known from emails and text messages, which on some blogs is augmented by a free mixing of French, English and Arabic. The informality applies to form as well as to content. Tidbits of political analysis, rumours, chatter, headlines from local television news and quotes from here and there are mixed with personal observations and indignations. This form of argumentation corresponds to what Bakhtin described as primary speech genres that are simple and mostly oral, as opposed to secondary written speech genres of higher complexity.[48] As Doostdar notes, both primary speech genres such as small talk, gossip and casual political analysis as well as secondary forms such as journalism, scholarly writing, poetry and other literary genres can be found on blogs.[49] In fact, it is the casual blending of the two that revokes the authority of high culture and hence, in Bakhtin's words, can appear to be "aimed sharply and polemically at official language."[50] Rather than covering or analysing the conflict in the polite tone of newspapers and television, Kerbaj calls on his fellow bloggers to "fucking resist" by speaking their mind and bluntly describing the civilian ordeals in the war. His calls were heard. During July and August 2006, the Lebanese blogosphere established itself as an alternative medium with a large international audience and played an important role in securing aid for Lebanon's suffering civilian population.

New speech, old politics

Soon after the war ended, many of the war blogs stopped updating.[51] They had been created from the momentum of war and from the urge to do something, to express oneself in the face of extreme adversity. But there are no signs that the recent surge in Lebanese blogs will subside. New blogs keep appearing and there are today more than three hundred Lebanese blogs offering an increasing diversity of social and political perspectives.[52] The dramatic events of February 2005 and July 2006 urged new groups to speak out. As a result of these circumstances, most Lebanese blogs are explicitly political, even those that resemble the Western model of "Myspace"-inspired blogs primarily set up to serve a specific circle of friends.[53] Life in Beirut is politicised to the extreme and even mundane conversations, on blogs as well as in real life, ultimately deal with public as much as with private concerns.

As an effect, the blog conversation continues to follow public debate in the rest of the public sphere. During the war, widespread disagreement in Lebanon over Hizbullah's right to provoke a military crisis was tempered by an ethos of national solidarity. After the war, solidarity has given way to renewed political feuds with sectarian overtones. These tensions are mirrored on blogs, but not in any equal way that reflects the level of popular support for Hizbullah. The Lebanese blogosphere is still primarily a domain for the young generation of Beiruti middle classes who played a key role in the Independence Intifada, and most bloggers back the "March 14 coalition" of Sunni, Christian and Druze politicians. Indeed, the development of a Lebanese blogosphere should be seen in relation to the boom in civil activism during and after the Independence Intifada. This political bias overlaps, often rather uneasily, with general weariness of old politics and old political leaders in Lebanon and a keen sense of the need to transcend sectarian and political divides. Here as elsewhere in Lebanon, an ethos

of cross-sectarianism coexists with a reality of sectarianism. Only in Lebanon! As one of

the A-list bloggers, Raja of Lebanese Bloggers, recently lamented:

> It amazes me how those of us who like to think of ourselves (or present ourselves) as above
>
> sectarianism, never the less, cannot seem to escape from the sectarian pull or grip. Very few
>
> bloggers blog as Maronites, Sunna, Shi'a, Druze, Orthodox or as representatives of other sects.
>
> Most of us wrap the Lebanese flag around ourselves and suggest to each other that our voices are
>
> those of independent free-thinkers, who are able to transcend our sectarian folds and reach out to
>
> one-another as Lebanese. Yet, although we refuse to identify ourselves as sectarian partisans,
>
> openly promoting the interests of our respective leaders (we are obviously above such behavior),
>
> we consistently appear to carry the banners of the causes adopted by those very men.[54]

One could translate this critique to a reflection on the structural constraints of the

blogosphere, and perhaps of civil activism in Lebanon generally. As this article has

shown, blogs do at least allow for increased interaction between opposing viewpoints.

They have introduced uncensored speech genres that reflect the lives of young Lebanese

into public debate. Finally, blogs have initiated new forms of political debate and

reporting which challenge the role of the intellectual establishment as the main defenders

of civil liberties and social critique. Regardless of such achievements, blogs are still

nothing more than a drop in the ocean, a counterpublic of counterpublics, compared to the

machinery of institutional politics in Lebanon. But then, perhaps the potential of blogging

does not lie in the creation of united fronts, but in the constant development of diversity of

opinion and the will to include others than "the pinnacle of Arab intelligentsia" in public

debate.[55] Like all Internet-based media, blogs reverse hierarchies of age and empower the

language and worldview of the young generation, which in a largely patriarchal society

such as Lebanon is significant both culturally and politically. Despite its contradictions

and limitations, the blogosphere has gotten a hold of young, politically active Lebanese

and is bound to play an increasing role in the negotiation of identity and politics as

Lebanon warily edges its way through—another—turbulent period in its national history.

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[1] Qana was the site of mass killings of civilians on July 30, 2006 as well as during the last Israeli invasion in 1996.

[2] Marc Lynch, *The New Arab Public Sphere - Iraq, Al-Jazeera, and Middle East Politics Today* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 125-38.

[3] The scope of this article is somewhat limited by the fact that time constraint did not allow me to interview bloggers and interact with blog users in Lebanon. Research that examines the production and consumption of blogs must be called for.

[4] Andreas Kluth, "Among the Audience - a Survey of the New Media," *The Economist*, no. April 22 (2006).

[5] Peter Lewis, "Invasion of the Podcast People: Blogs Are So 2004," *Fortune Magazine* 152, no. 2 (2005).

[6] Kluth, "Among the Audience - a Survey of the New Media."

[7] Rebecca Blood, *Weblogs: A History and Perspective* (www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog.history.html, 2006 [cited).

[8] According to Internet World Stats, there are around seventeen million Internet users in the Arab Middle East, equalling less than 10% of the population. In comparison, 69% of North Americans and 52% of Europeans are Internet users. http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm.

[9] Imprisonment of Arab bloggers are regularly reported on the "metablog on Arab blogs," http://arabblogandpoliticalcommunication.blogspot.com/.

[10] For an overview over Arab blogs in English, see http://www.al-bab.com/arab/blogs.htm.

[11] Alireza Doostdar, "The Vulgar Spririt of Blogging: On Language, Culture and Power in Persian Weblogistan," *American Anthropologist* 106, no. 4 (2004), 654-57.

[12] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1989). In this much-quoted book, Habermas explored the emergence of a literary public in 1800-century Europe through novels and journals—the new media of that time—and spaces for their readership such as coffeehouses and salons. Since its translation into English in the 1989, Habermas' work has been the standard theoretical reference in most discussions about public life, public spheres and new media.

[13] Samule M. Wilson and Leighton L. Peterson, "The Anthropology of Online Communities," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31, no. 1 (2002).

[14] Jon Alterman, *New Media, New Politics? : From Satellite Television to the Internet in the Arab World* (Washjngton: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1998).

[15] Lynch, *The New Arab Public Sphere - Iraq, Al-Jazeera, and Middle East Politics Today*, chapter two.

[16] Michael C. Hudson, "On the Influence of the Intellectual in Arab Politics and Policymaking," *Journal of Social Affairs* 22, no. 88 (2005).

[17] Doostdar, "The Vulgar Spririt of Blogging: On Language, Culture and Power in Persian Weblogistan."

[18] Seyla Benhabib, "The Embattled Public Sphere: Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas and Beyond," in *Reasoning Practically*, ed. Edna Ulmann-Margalit (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). For new approaches to the public sphere away from the Habmersian ideal, see Craig J. Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, *Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1992), John Michael Roberts and Nick Crossley, eds., *After Habermas - New Perspectives on the Public Sphere* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

[19] James Bohman, "Expanding Dialogue: The Internet, the Public Sphere and Prospects for Transnational Democracy," in *After Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere*, ed. Nick Crossley and John Michael Roberts (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 133-35.

[20] Sue Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 18-44.

[21] Bohman, "Expanding Dialogue: The Internet, the Public Sphere and Prospects for Transnational Democracy," 139-40. See also M. Froomkin, "Habermas@Discourse.Net: Towards a Critical Theory of Cyberspace," *Harvard Law Review* 16 (2003).

[22] Jon W. Anderson, "The Internet and Islam's New Interpretors," in *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*, ed. Dale Eickelman (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999).

[23] For "counterpublics" in the Independence Intifada, see Sune Haugbolle, "Spatial Transformations in the Lebanese Independence Intifada," *Arab Studies Journal* 12, no. 3 (2006).

[24] Mona Al Tahawy of *Asharq Alawsat*, quoted by William Fisher in the Daily Star, 21/3, 2005.

[25] Some of the earliest Lebanese blogs were Across the bay and www.blissstreetjournal.blogspot.com (both 2004).

[26] www.angryarab.blogspot.com.

[27] www.lebanesebloggers.blogspot.com.

[28] www.beirutspring.blogspot.com, www.lebop.blogspot.com.

[29] www.lebaneseabroad.blogspot.com

[30] www.beirut2bayside.blogspot.com and www.beirutbeltway.com.

[31] Tony Badran, interviewed in the Daily Star, 10/3, 2006.

[32] Other important Middle East studies blogs include Juan Cole's Informed Comment (www.juancole.com) and Martin Kramer's Sandbox (www.martinkramer.org/index.html).

[33] ww.faculty-staff.ou.edu/L/Joshua.M.Landis-1/syriablog.

[34] www.lebanonheartblogs.blogspot.com.

[35] Andrew Ó Baoill, "Weblogs and the Public Sphere," *Into the Blogsphere* (2004).

[36] Elise Adib Salem, *Constructing Lebanon - a Century of Literary Narratives* (Gainesvilles: University of Florida Press, 2003), 111.

[37] www.siegeoflebanon.blogspot.com, beirutlive.blogspot.com. See also Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, in The Daily Star, 3/8, 2006.

[38] www.pkblogs.com/mazenkerblog.

[39] www.lebanonupdates.blogspot.com and www.samidoun.blogspot.com.

[40] www.july2006waronlebanon.blogspot.com, www.electronicintifada.net/lebanon.

[41] www.rashasalti.blogspot.com. See also Rasha Salti, "Siege Notes," *MERIP* 240 (2006).

[42] Ibid.

[43] www.Lebanesebloggers.blogspot.com/2006_07_01_Lebanese bloggers_archive.html.

[44] Jon Alterman: "A proganda war that can be lost in translation," in *Financial Times*. 23/8, 2006.

[45] www.jamalghosn.blogspot.com. Similar sarcastic blogs include www.ramziblahblah.blogspot.com and www.anecdotesfromabananarepublic.blogspot.com.

[46] www.jamalghosn.blogspot.com/2006/08/hal-balad.html#links.

[47] Art blogs: www.laureghorayeb.blogspot.com, www.thelebanese.blogspot.com. Blogs in Arabic:
www.blogspot-light.blogspot.com, www.satrewaya.blogspot.com, www.mysteriouseve.blogspot.com.

[48] M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

[49] Doostdar, "The Vulgar Spririt of Blogging: On Language, Culture and Power in Persian Weblogistan," 654.

[50] Bakhtin, quoted in Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin*, 20.

[51] See for example www.lebanonupdates.blogspot.com, www.ecocampaigner.blogspot.com and www.siegeoflebanon.blogspot.com.

[52] www.lebanonheartblogs.blogspot.com.

[53] www.myspace.com is a popular social networking Web site offering an interactive, user-submitted network of friends, personal profiles, blogs, photos, music, and videos.

[54] www.Lebanesebloggers.blogspot.com/2006/09/little-introspection.html.

[55] Hudson, "On the Influence of the Intellectual in Arab Politics and Policymaking," 84.