

Arab blogs: Or how I learned to stop worrying and to love Middle East dictators

The headline is a lie. I never did stop worrying about the Middle East and my hatred for its dictators is just as virulent as ever. But one thing has changed: I no longer feel the despair and indifference borne of years reporting on the region's leaders. And that's thanks to blogs.

Blogs have reignited my love for the Middle East in a way nothing has in years. By the time I left Egypt in 2000, I was deadly bored of both the region and the men who run it, after a decade criss-crossing borders, even flirting with State Security trouble by living in Israel for a year. But all that time and all that trouble had done was drag me further into the bog of stagnation that had its stubborn grip on the region.

I could not get further away. How about 10 time zones away to Seattle on the Pacific Northwest coast of the U.S.? That is where I moved resolving to dispassionately watch, just watch.

And then 9/11 happened and maintaining the dispassion required to cover news objectively became impossible for me. It was then that I switched decisively to opinion

writing. I moved to New York, closer to the Middle East—you might say I was inching my way back both geographically and career-wise—but the watching continued. Just watching. Elections were still being rigged in Egypt. Israelis and Palestinians were still slaughtering each other.

But just watching became impossible on May 25, 2005. A blog entry by Alaa Abdel Fattah on Manal and Alaa's Bit Bucket, the blog he ran with his wife, grabbed my cynicism by the throat and threw it out the window of my New York apartment. His stream of consciousness piece, part Arabic and part English, told how he had managed to protect his mother from a beating by police during a demonstration but that he earned plenty of bruises of his own to take home.

Just watching, from that day on, would have been the height of cowardice. That blog entry hurt me almost as much as Alaa's bruises must have hurt him.

Something was happening in Egypt. The first Kifaya demonstration in December 2004, with its focus on internal issues—precisely the issues absent from the demonstrations I had covered during my news years in Egypt—was breathtaking in its bold opposition to President Hosni Mubarak.

The bloggers were the electronic pamphleteers for the street activists. At times, they were both one and the same—blogger and activist. But not always. Some bloggers were just watching too but just watching in Egypt and lending me their eyes.

And not just in Egypt but across the region, a region long dominated by old men. Here, finally, were young people telling anyone who listened—or not—how they felt.

Al Jazeera and the pan-Arab news channels might have pulled the rug out from under the region's state-owned media but they rarely broke the mold of one old man challenging another. The bloggers were mostly the young and the excluded and it mattered little to them who stood on that rug and who pulled it. They had never been allowed anywhere near the rug so why would they care?

I asked one young Egyptian why he started a blog. He was going to explode if he didn't tell the world how he felt was his simple reply.

It was time to go home. I had to get closer to that passion and inhale.

Egyptian blogs were the epicenter of a little earthquake I had first felt a couple of time zones to the East. Bahraini blogs, Kuwaiti blogs and—hallelujah!—Saudi blogs were my first heady introductions into the world of online agitprop. The Saudi blogs were particularly sweet. Six miserable years spent as a teenager in Jeddah had seared to the back of my throat volumes, not just words, of rage. The Saudi bloggers spoke them for me.

Particularly one simply called Saudigirl. At a conference on Arab media at the National Press Club in Washington DC in 2005, I quoted Saudigirl describing herself as a “young. Saudi chick. unveiled, unconservatized” who had never voted but who hoped one day “to walk in on a ballot box in jeans, t-shirt, and flip-flops so that everyone can see my pretty toes while I express my freedom.”

Naim wrote in the comments section to tell Saudigirl, “You sound like a really cool girl. I'd love to see your pretty little toes as you stride up to the ballot box in your jeans and t-shirt and cast your vote, hopefully someday soon!”

Just a few hours later, Mueen wrote to tell Saudigirl that if she was really a Muslim Saudi, it was good to be well educated but “within [the] limits of Islam”.

“My request to u is that don't ever try to cross the limits of your religion. Be afraid of that day when no one can help any one,” he told her.

I even wrote to Saudigirl. I emailed her and she emailed back. I emailed many bloggers but she was my favourite. My one gripe was that she didn't write enough. I lost track of her blog for a while until on a whim I googled her to see how Saudigirl was doing. And to my shock it turned out she had really been Saudiboy all along. It was a case of “rhetorical transvestism” confessed Ali K, the man who invented and maintained Alia K.

What a bittersweet twist on the gender play of those writers of yore, those George Sands or George Eliots and others who adopted male names, personas and wardrobes to splinter taboos. Here was a Saudi man pretending to be a woman.

And what a delicious irony that a real female Saudi blogger called Mystique said she was shocked.

According to *The Washington Post's* Faiza Saleh Ambah, young women make up half the bloggers in Saudi Arabia today. There are around 2,000 blogs in the Kingdom today. So Saudigirl has left the blogosphere in good hands.

Bahraini bloggers did not harness gender politics to their cause so much as the politics of fear that had given birth to the colour-coded alert system in place in the U.S. to describe the “national threat level”.

When the Bahraini authorities arrested three Internet forum moderators, bloggers launched an appeal on their behalf, posted the times and locations of demonstrations calling for their release, and kept a colour-coded alert system which used colour to describe how close to freedom the men were.

To appreciate such subversity is to appreciate the wonder of blogs.

But the blogs have a miniscule audience, their detractors say. Not enough eyes and ears, they complain. To those detractors, to those old men on the rug still trying to figure out who'll be left standing and to those who are still wading through the bog of stagnation, covered in self-defeat, I say "so what?"

And in defense of my "so what?" is the recent hat-trick, a triple whammy, scored by Egyptian bloggers.

One: the exposure by bloggers of the sexual assaults of women in downtown Cairo by gangs of men during a religious holiday in Cairo in October 2006. Bloggers forced the issue onto the national agenda. Egyptian authorities studiously maintain the blogs were trying to make Egypt look bad but the flood of comments left by women attesting to their daily versions of the downtown sexual assaults showed otherwise.

Back to those electronic pamphleteers for a minute, because it is they who complete the circle between the October sexual assaults and May 25, 2005. Alaa and his mother were not the only targets of state-sanctioned violence that day. Many female protestors and journalists were sexually assaulted by security forces and pro-government thugs. Several bloggers who wrote about the October sexual assaults had previously witnessed those sexual assaults in May 2005 and so were more than ready to hold the State accountable for the security forces' failure to bring offenders to justice.

Two: the detention in December of a police officer accused of sexually assaulting a prisoner. A month earlier Egyptian blogs had circulated a video showing the prisoner, Imad El Kabir, with hands bound behind his back and his legs held in the air, being sodomised with a stick as those around him taunt him. His lawyer has said the torture took place in January 2006 in a police station after Kabir was detained and beaten for trying to stop an argument between the police and his brother.

Three: the second detention in 18-months of 22-year-old blogger Abdul Kareem Nabil—also known as Kareem Amer—after he posted articles critical of Islam on his blog. When the security services of President Hosni Mubarak, the man who has dominated Egypt for a quarter of a century, arrest a blogger then the phrase “David and Goliath” cannot even begin to explain it.

No words on blogs and no discussion on how effective they are should ever take place without sparing a thought for one of the early established Arab bloggers and cyber-dissidents, Zouhair Yahyaoui, who died at the young age of 36 in March 2005.

Back in July 2001, when the word blog was still a bloom in a webster’s Dictionary’s eye, Zouhair founded the website TUNeZINE using the pseudonym “Ettounsi,” which means Tunisian in Arabic. He used the online newspaper not just to write about Tunisia’s dismal human rights record but also posted opposition statements on the site.

After his arrest in an Internet café in 2002, he was sentenced to two years in prison—and actually served 16 months—for "disseminating inaccurate news"—a police state's euphemism for the truth. It is not difficult to imagine that his early death was precipitated by a form of torture he was subjected to twice during interrogation in which the victim is made to hang from his arms with his feet barely touching the ground.

Again, one man, one website = one very angry dictator.

No matter how many eyes and ears the blogs have, who can doubt the power of the Internet?

Whenever I think of Tunisia and the Internet I always think of 10 minutes. That's how much time journalist and human rights campaigner Sihem Bensedrine has to type out her latest news before security apparatus track down the Internet café she is filing from. Then she slips out to another café to begin another round of 10 minutes. I'll never forget hearing her describe this at a conference in Copenhagen we spoke at last year that was organized by the Danish chapter of the writers' organization PEN on freedom of expression in the Arab world.

How many rounds of 10 minutes do we spend surfing the net, mindlessly? She has 10 minutes to tell the world about the latest horrors of the police state otherwise known as the torture fiefdom of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali aka Tunisia.

I remembered Sihem's 10 minutes during a lunch I had with Alaa Abdel Fattah in Cairo in October. The first time I met Alaa was over lunch in June 2005 and I told him he was the reason I came home. During that second lunch he told me that he and fellow activists jailed for weeks over the summer for taking part in demonstrations had been able to fill three pages of a newspaper and even design the layout from their jail cells.

Alaa was probably detained because authorities thought with the young activist in prison, the opposition websites he helped maintain would fold. They never thought for a second that Manal, his wife, could keep them going, Alaa told me with a slyly proud smile.

And so while my worry for the Middle East remains and my hatred for its dictators is intact, bloggers and their ingenuity with all that the Internet has offered them have eviscerated my dispassion. They are the bomb I ride with Dr. Strangelove's wild-eyed abandon.

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