Personal Blogging in Egypt: pushing social boundaries or reinforcing them?

By George Weyman

October, 2007. Just before going to bed one Friday night in early January 2007, Maat decided she had had enough of thinking, she wanted to write. Taking up the computer, she opted to present her manifesto in bright colors—yellows, oranges and red—on the dark blue background of her blog, Two Pairs of Eyes, which she shares with best friend Nephthys. The choice was not arbitrary, but rather helped her shape an emerging idea. Setting out her title, she hit 'Caps Lock' for the spoken emphasis text lacks: "ONE is made up of FRACTIONS." In her chirpy tone, threaded with the seriousness of a young woman trying to make sense of life, she wrote:

> About 15 years ago I was totally convinced that there are no shades of black and white. Black is just black, white can only be white. It happened some time within those last 15 years that I've noticed that some black pants for example don't actually have the exact same shade of black as my black shirt!... Nothing is all black or all white. Nothing is one color. How can it be if this one color has all those different shades in it? No one is all good or all bad. No one is flawless but no one is all devilish either.

A dramatic, rallying cry for the blog's favorite visitors, the post read like the proclamation of a young Egyptian woman demanding not to be judged at face value.

"Don't come up to me and tell me you know me," she continued, "unless you've heard me talk for hours, seen me crying, heard me laughing from the heart, seen me talking to myself…" It was almost an invitation.

The post elicited many responses, not least from a less-familiar blogger to the site, mitar2a3, who commented:

> The pharse or the 'FACT' that i really liked is "No one is just ONE! You' one person with the one you love, another with those you hate, another with strangers, … and a **whole** other with your children." adding 'another with those reading ur posts' LOL

Ever the honest blogger, Maat came clean, admitting to the latest stranger to visit her site that under her pseudonym of an ancient Egyptian goddess she could give her readers privileged access to her life:

> Mitar2a3,
> glad u liked the post :D
> as for being someone else with those reading the post.. hehe... true... in that case i'm exposing more of what i think than i do in real life!

Two Pairs of Eyes is one of a plethora of what I will term 'personal' blogs that have emerged in Egypt, and across the Arab World, in recent years. These blogs give an unprecedented view into the social life the region's globally-minded young people. But the overwhelming interest of Western researchers to date has been on the Middle East's 'political' blogs, despite the fact that most Arab blogs are not political in the strict sense

of tackling issues related to government, state or international relations. Though the impact of 'political' blogging is surely worthy of close scrutiny, there is another—perhaps much wider—perspective on blogging in the Arab World which needs to be studied. This perspective is the growth of 'personal' blogs which are run by individuals for a close-knit group of friends and peer bloggers. These blogs relate not to grand and gritty politics, but to events in individuals' direct experience, thoughts they may be having, or problems they are facing. They are interesting because they have repercussions for how the young people who use them think of themselves.

In analyzing the life of one blog I hope to move away from much of current writing on blogging which tends to focus on charting the 'blogosphere'. Here I hope instead to give insight to the mechanics of one blog, to look at how it is used and the arguments it displays, arguments and practices which I believe would not be sustainable elsewhere. To do this demands a number of caveats. Although Two Pairs of Eyes is in many ways socially liberal and feminist, I do not want to claim that this blog is representative of all Egyptian blogs, or that it is evidence for how blogging necessarily promotes liberal views. There are many blogs which advocate traditional views, just as in any other medium, and there are many web users with traditional views who use other blogs to expound their worldview. But I do want to claim that blogs have the potential for users to create in-group identities founded on common principles which may provide a significant challenge to dominant discourses in society. For young Egyptian women, this

can mean challenging publicly the patriarchal values which regulate their social lives.[1]

Mounting such a challenge publicly elsewhere would induce very serious social costs for

women, and may be equated with rejection of community or religious identity. Two

Pairs of Eyes, I will argue, provides an outlet for the emergence of a new kind of

conversation, central to which is a fundamental questioning of the status quo.

"Why is everyone obsessed with the idea of marriage?"

The blog and its arguments

"Who the hell defined gender roles in this society?"[2] asks Maat rhetorically in a

typically high-tempo post bristling with unconcealed ire. "Who coined those illogical

beliefs and announced them to be "right"?" she continues. "It's a load of bullshitty crap

that just makes me want to throw up or scream at the top of my lungs." The post ends

with an appeal: "LET HER DO WHAT SHE WANTSSSS DAMN ITTTTTTTTTTT!!!"

There's little in the way of naming names on Two Pairs of Eyes, but for the in-group of

peer bloggers it is likely clear who Maat refers to. For the new arrival to the blog, much

remains a mystery. But the clarity of the argument is clear: why can Egyptian women not

have more choice over their lives?

This question lies at the heart of a blog in which Maat and Nephthys have been

tackling from first hand experience many of the most contentious social issues facing

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[1] Suad Joseph (1994) suggests that patriarchy regulates social relations across household types and social class in a Beirut camp. See "Brother/Sister Relationships: Connectivity, Love, and Power in the Reproduction of Patriarchy in Lebanon." *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 21, No. 1

[2] http://nepeyes.blogspot.com/2007/09/fuming.html

Egyptian society for more than a year. They do not write according to an abstractly

defined agenda, nor do they write about subjects which emanate from the community

because they are 'newsworthy'. Instead the blog is driven by first-hand experiences

which they want to share. Thus they confide their frustrations with family, provide

musings on friendship and love, detail their anxieties, and engage in an often intense

interrogation of the self. They also write in a highly personal way, using their own

linguistic features and combining styles which appeal both to argumentation and to train-

of-thought writing. These elements give the blog a compelling edge over the formulaic

reports of journalism written invariably from a distance and with a (perhaps necessary)

detachment. The blog is a frank record of thoughts produced in the heat of the moment, a

powerful tool for breaking down traditional notions of what media are and do. In this

way, Two Pairs of Eyes give expression to a kind of resistance which might otherwise not

be visible or locatable for the researcher.

It might be seductive then to read the blog as a wide-ranging rejection of Egpytian

social values. Certainly, Maat and Nephthys are forthright critics of many of the social

practices most closely cherished and defended in Egypt concerning female behavior:

early marriage, the expectation that women should want to become mothers, external

displays of religiosity, abstention from alcohol consumption, commitment to the family

and more. But their blog does not advocate *rejection* of social values so much as

reformulation of them. The distinction is crucial. It shows that, however 'global' their

blog feels on first inspection, Maat and Nephthys are engaged in social critique rooted

within Egyptian society, a critique that has a very Egyptian lineage, but one which may

only just be finding a new voice online. In other media and public settings, such criticism would have to be tempered or couched in ways which appeal to a wider audience. But on a blog, Maat and Nephthys can write for their own in-group unrestrained.

Central to the critique is a questioning of the role of women. "Why is everyone obsessed with the idea of marriage?" asks Maat in a typically abrasive post.[3] "Why can't anyone believe me or understand me when i say that getting married right now would be my last option?" Here again, the sense of the personal comes through. Maat uses her own experience and aspirations to argue a wider case that marriage should not be the only means by which women can migrate into adulthood. "So what if i wanna do more than a couple of things first?" she asks, "so what if i'm not dieng [dying] to get married? my life doesnt depend on it."

The critique is wide ranging, and is all the more challenging for it. Maat is saying her life does not depend on marriage, when for many Egyptian women marriage is crucial for bringing social status and the all-important transition away from the family home of their childhood. She is also arguing that her interests in marriage come before those of her parents—again a problematic idea in a patriarchal setting. And she is saying that women should have greater agency in determining the progression of their own lives, clearly implying that the pursuit of a career outside the family structure and without the protection of a man should not be deemed failure. "I just wanna have my own personal space for some time and achieve a little something on my won [own]," she says.

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[3] http://nepeyes.blogspot.com/2006/06/blog-post_115038797290031098.html

But it is important not to read Maat's comments on marriage as an outright rejection of social norms, even if her words would be highly controversial for the wider Egyptian public. The post clearly does not seek the demise of marriage in the Arab world, but supports it. "I'm not against the idea of early marriage....as long as the married couple know what they're doing and are responsible enough," she says. She is therefore seeking to change the principles which govern marriage—encouraging women to have a greater role in how their marriage takes place. She also admits that she does aspire to marriage some day, but also reminds the reader that only God ultimately knows how her life will progress: **"**Eventually i will get married.....or not...whatever...only God knows." So Maat is completely happy with the idea of committing to a religiously sanctified marriage, what she wants is a greater role in the process. Her critique then is really against patriarchal meaning derived from marriage in Egypt, not the institution itself. "So pleeeease....just stop trying to fix me up with 'good' guys," she says in an implicit rebuke to her family, "and don't give any of the "del ragel wala del 7eta" [a man's shadow is more protective than a wall's] or "yalla sheddy 7elek 3ayzeen nefra7 beeky fel kosha" [come on we want to see you sitting by your groom at your wedding]."

The very fact that Maat is pursuing this agenda so sincerely is an indication of the extent to which patriarchal values are upheld in Egypt, even in higher society and the educated elite. It also shows how such a critique would be near impossible in a setting in which inter- and intra-familial interaction predominates. The durability of patriarchal values hinges in part on the fact that women lose social capital if they challenge the boundaries too overtly. This is because the honor of men is largely invested in ensuring

the modesty of the women they are responsible for—wives, sisters, daughters, nieces. To

forge critique depends on being able to circumvent the bind in which women find

themselves. It is arguable that modernist discourses which advocate greater

independence for women—the same discourses which inform Maat's comments—have

not fundamentally challenged patriarchal values in Egypt, but have been superimposed

above them. Hence modern womanhood in Egypt is still predicated on the aspiration of

being a wife, mother and keeper of domestic space.[4] Maat is seeking to challenge this,

and her critique depends on the reinforcing encouragement of a community of like-

minded peer bloggers.

This becomes clear when we assess the comments bloggers leave. In a post

entitled 'El Tamatem' Maat describes her discomfort at being covertly checked out by a

mother as a potential bride for her son.[5] The post is a frank display of Maat's frustration

at being treated, in her view, as if she were an object. In keeping with the dynamics of

the blog, peer bloggers rush to Maat's support. "I really wish i were there, looool, of

course u know how i would have reacted," offers Insomniac.[6] "YOU GO GIRLLLLLL,"

shouts Mariam.[7] Deeeeeee adds to the consensus, reporting her own similar experience.[8]

But then the consensus is suddenly shattered by an anonymous male blogger: "It was

more your loss cause you prejudged the guy without even getting to know him and

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[4] Omnia Shakry. 1998. "Schooled Mothers and Structured Play: Child Rearing in Turn-of-the-Century Egypt." In Lila Abu-Lughod (ed). *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; See also in Abu-Lughod (ed) 1998, Afsaneh Najmabadi. "Crafting an Educated Housewife in Iran."
[5] Maat is not un-used to this experience. She says her family has tried to set her up with a future husband on at least four occasions.
[6] http://nepeyes.blogspot.com/2007/04/el-tamatem.html#comment-1653239230092476811
[7] http://nepeyes.blogspot.com/2007/04/el-tamatem.html#comment-1888732762425364423
[8] http://nepeyes.blogspot.com/2007/04/el-tamatem.html#comment-4296059259648155421

without any logical reason," he argues, taking Maat and her blogging cohorts on directly.

"Yes he resorted to a very traditional way but at least he came through the door not the

window."[9] The anonymous commenter goes on to suggest that Maat's comments are

insulting to a man who made an honest attempt to meet a potential bride through his

mother:

> "And for what he did, he does not deserve to be offended like that and have sarcastic
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> comments made about him. Think of this: today you are 22 years old, tomorrow you
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> might think of all the chances you missed and that you might have lost a great person for
>
> a husband… Word of advice: don't mock others when it comes to these matters."[10]

In her response, Maat is diplomatic, thanking the anonymous poster for his views.

She says her intention was never to offend and admits that an arranged marriage 'works

for some'.[11] This approach is testament to Maat's willingness to engage in sustained

debate with other Egyptians on the issues she confronts. She is not seeking to reject out

of hand dominant social practices concerning marriage but to widen the scope for women

to play a greater role. "You cannot just see someone walking down the street and decide

to go meet her parents!" she argues.[12] "The whole point was me objecting to this way of

thinking and acting." But Maat is not alone. As the thread continues and the anonymous

blogger pursues his challenge, the consensus set of peer bloggers move in to ensure it is

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[9] "Laken enty fy elmokabel 7'serty la2enek 7akamty 3ala 7ad mn 3'er ma te3rafeeh w ma3andekeesh logic reasons, ah howa laga2 le taree2a takleedeya laken 3ala el2a2al howa 7ab yeegy mn elbab msh mn elshobak." http://nepeyes.blogspot.com/2007/04/el-tamatem.html#comment-7790105068975360796

[10] "W 3ala de elmafroud enoh ma yethaza2sh kda aw teb2a el comments sarcastic belshakl dah. Fakary masalan enty lnahardah 3andek 22 bokra el3omr yegry w gih 3aliky yom fakarty fy 7ayatek ely fatet, w elforas ely kanet 2odamek w enek rafadty w robama daya3ty sha7's kowayes mn edek…Nasee7a a7'aweya ma tes7'areesh mn elnas fy elmawadee3 de" http://nepeyes.blogspot.com/2007/04/el-tamatem.html#comment-7790105068975360796

[11] http://nepeyes.blogspot.com/2007/04/el-tamatem.html#comment-5597011516147647214

[12] "Mayenfa3sh aslak teshoof wa7da mashya fel share3 t2ool khalas ana hakalem 2ahlaha bokra!!" http://nepeyes.blogspot.com/2007/04/el-tamatem.html#comment-5597011516147647214

they who speak loudest on their patch. In this case, it is Insomniac who presents the

argument most vociferously in Maat's defence, suggesting that the mother who checked

Maat out "should know a lot better than to use old methods that may no longer apply in

the here and now." Insomniac goes on, "from a female's perspective, this does not say a

lot about her son's character … marriages r far more serious than that.. it's not an item of

clothing or a car." The leveling aspect of blogs are plain to see—here we have women

combining to corner a male, an event that might not be so common in other debates of

Egypt's public life. But also the blog comments have an unequal quality. The peer

bloggers defend their patch against incomers who disagree, and in the process galvanize

themselves around a vision of a less patriarchal society. "As a mother myself," concludes

Insomniac in her support for her sister Maat, "this is not how i would like my son to

marry just like i don't think it's a way for my sister to marry."

In another post, Maat further questions the role of women, saying what is largely

unthinkable in Egyptian society. "I'm ok with being an aunty, don't have to be a

mommy."[13] She goes on to reveal that "I finally made up my mind: I don't wanna have

kids!!!!" To question not only the reason for having children, but the very desire is a

highly controversial line for an Egyptian woman to take publicly. For the vast majority

in Egypt, the idea of womanhood is inextricably bound to the destiny of motherhood.[14]

But here Maat points to aspects of motherhood she deems negative– "changing

diapers…. Little sleep… very little time for yourself." To make this comment so

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[13] http://nepeyes.blogspot.com/2006/07/im-ok-with-being-aunty-dont-have-to-be.html
[14] My partner and I were constantly reminded of this while living in Egypt. Taxi drivers, shop-keepers and waiters would invariably ask my partner if we had children. The expectation that marriage should produce children extends to the higher classes too.

forcefully in any other Egyptian media would be deeply problematic. The statement in effect undermines the social construction of womanhood as naturally bound to motherhood, and would therefore likely be deemed a rejection of belonging or an expression of a crisis in identity. But there's more. Maat openly directs her aversion for motherhood towards her father, refusing to play her assigned role as a key building block within her father's outward presentation of a successful family: "EVERYBODY visiting you and the baby, people you might not even know but who happen to be friends of your father!! (which is kinda one of the reasons I dont wanna have a wedding either)." This confession would be a serious dent to her father's social capital if she were to make it in other public company.

But as with other posts, there is a tempering of her claim. This shows that she is not seeking to reject outright Egyptian social values, she rather wants to reformulate them. She admits that her views are not static and opens herself to the possibility of being a mother when the time is right. "I also know that the time will come when I might totally change my mind about all that and will want to have a baby," she says. "Why the hurry anyway, it's not like I'm getting married tomorrow, not b4 8 more years." This qualification to her polemic is important because it repositions the post from *I don't want to have kids*, to, *right now I don't want to have kids, let me decide when I'm ready*.

It is not just Maat who writes critically about culture; Nephthys also takes part. In perhaps the most provocative post of the entire blog, Nephthys tackles public piety and the culture of judging others' religiosity on external performance.

Monday, September 11, 2006

<u>**No Religion for me Please!**</u>

They used to say "*al-Deen lelah, wal Watan elegamee3*" [*Religion for oneself, and the nation for all*] I loved that sentence. It taught me that religion is sth personal, sth inside me.

Not any more.

There has been a trend, and still going fast and getting faster with Ramadan approaching, of who is the most religious? Sorry, I mean who is showing that he is the most religious?

It is preferred to say "Alsalamo-3alaykom" instead of Good morning so that people would not think u r not religious. You should pray as soon as the prayer is called for and who does not do that, is raising suspicions around himself. And if suspicions are raised around you, prepare yourself for a long lecture and lots and lots of advice.

One is not judged by the way he treats people or how good u perform ur work or how devoted u r to work. U r not judged by how sincere and honest u r with others….

I don't mind someone boasting being religion, whether Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist or even Hindu, and I don't mind if someone said frankly he is an atheist. Coz simply it is none of my business. I don't care. And I don't know enough in religion to preach.

If u r pure at heart, then I love you.

….

> So plz, stop trying to get inside me to know how religious I am. Don't try
>
> to pull me with u, wtever ur way was.
>
> Religion is sth personal, sth between me and God. And God, only God,
>
> will judge my deeds, thoughts, words … etc. Only God will decide to
>
> which team did I belong.
>
> Till then plz just … Fuck off.
>
> ***And Give Religion A Break!***
>
> Nephthys[15]

It may seem obvious to suggest that this post would be deemed highly controversial if made in any other public context, a reminder that the combination of anonymity and largely uncensored space gives bloggers a remarkable freedom to test the cultural boundaries. What is at stake here is hard to underestimate. Nephthys would be risking everything if this post could be attributed to her real name.[16]

The post is also a clear indication that Nephthys values religion in her life and is comfortable living in a society in which religion has a central role to play in the lives of its citizens. What she seeks is to reformulate the position Islam has in public life in Egypt, allowing for greater emphasis on a secular sphere and social pluralism. The timing of the post is also crucial—just before Ramadan, the holy month of Islam when 'everybody is talking religion' as she says. Ramadan is necessarily a time of public piety when Muslims reaffirm their faith and their religious devotion by fasting during daylight

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[15] http://nepeyes.blogspot.com/search?q=no+religion+for+me+please
[16] It is also interesting that it was hard for Nephthys to admit to having written this post on our first meeting

hours—a public display which demands abstention from many forms of consumption.

For many, the practice of fasting during Ramadan encourages a heightened atmosphere of

public morality, censure and judgment. The post is a response to this public piety, but not

to the notion of faith itself.

The argument Nephthys articulates is clearly secular modernist in character, but it

is also clearly rooted in an Egyptian discussion about freedom, pluralism and the public

sphere. In other public spaces and media though, this argument would likely be labeled

anti-Muslim. In Egypt, community sensibilities about religious observance are

continuously reinforced by the inability of alternative voices to take root. Criticisms of

public piety are likely seen as an attack on faith itself, and can therefore be isolated and

stifled because the bringer of an attack on faith is herself stepping outside the community.

But here Nephthys has the space and anonymity to pursue a double agenda: reaffirming

her faith whilst criticizing the public expectations about how she should display that

faith.[17] The blog is the only medium which allows her to do this; Two Pairs of Eyes

allows Nephthys to articulate a nuanced sensibility about religion without fear of reproof.

And that is all the more incredible given that publicly Nephthys is never seen outside her

home without wearing the hijab. Nor is Maat.

Post, comment, comment, post

The blog and its dynamics

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[17] Nephthys' faith comes through in the words, "only God, will judge my deeds, thoughts, words"

Although the blog is not driven by news or politics, there are ways in which it adheres to certain principles of communication applicable to other media. In a similar way to an op-ed page, each post seeks to make a point or achieve a certain goal. Posts are edited only briefly by the bloggers (they always write first into a word document, but would not seek editorial input from others and would only make minimal editorial changes to their posts), but they do have to meet expectations of the blog's regular readers in interesting ways. On one occasion, for example, Nephthys attacks Maat for writing too long a post, describing long posts as boring.[18] On another occasion, Maat apologizes for writing a whole post in anglo-arabic, the style of writing Arabic colloquial using Latin letters.[19] The subsequent comments are the site of debate in response to the posts. The relationship between comments and posts is important; comments confirm that posts are relevant to readers while posts provide the framework for the discussion which comments comprise. The need to elicit comments not only provides Maat and Nephthys with a direct incentive to produce fresh and engaging posts about all aspects of their social lives, it also reminds us that personal blogs—rather than being one-sided and introspective—seek to shape a sense of belonging in similar ways to other media. Two Pairs of Eyes is one lynchpin in a network of blogs around which a self-defined online community is emerging.

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[18] "could u plz use a word count in ur posts and replies coz when they are tooooooooo long they are IRRITATING AND BORING" http://nepeyes.blogspot.com/2007/05/baaaad-world.html#comment-4722754265029815938

[19] "*excuse the anglo-arab.... i know it's annoying but there was no way i'd be able to write all that in arabic letters... if i wanted to post it within this month that is." http://nepeyes.blogspot.com/2007/04/el-tamatem.html

Whilst Two Pairs of Eyes is a vehicle for some controversial arguments, Maat admits that such commentary is not typical of her life more generally: "I'm no activist or anything of that sort… in fact.. I'm frequently referred to as "submissive" for I almost never object and I usually just take in whatever is offered to me."[20] If Maat is unable to pose these questions so forcefully elsewhere, it is worth asking what makes it viable for her to ask them on her blog. I will argue that three factors play a central role—the anonymity, interactivity and youthfulness of the blogging phenomenon in Egypt.

Perhaps the most crucial factor is that Two Pairs of Eyes is anonymous. This is important because it enables Maat and Nephthys to elaborate personal identities, fantasies, thoughts and intimate problems without either the consent or knowledge of their family. They both readily admit that they could never tell their parents about the blog, and even suggest that they live "two lives" separate from one another—their family identity on the one hand, and their blog identity on the other. This division is paralleled by the way the two bloggers use social networking site Facebook separately from their blog. Through Facebook, they present the acceptable public 'face' of their social lives, whilst through the blog they divulge inner thoughts which they cannot attribute to their names. Although they know and meet regularly with blogging friends in coffee shops like Cilantros (one regular visitor to the blog is Insomniac—Maat's sister), they work hard to ensure their blogging identity is not revealed on Facebook. Maat says she has turned down network and friend requests on Facebook for this reason.

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[20] http://nepeyes.blogspot.com/2007/09/fuming.html

But why should maintaining anonymity be so important? Anonymity allows Maat and Nephthys to express their frustrations and develop criticisms without the threat of losing social credibility. Blogs allow for the imagining and development of small-scale online counter-cultures whilst their writers continue to live a social life deemed acceptable. In Egypt, the idea of young people embracing an untrammeled counter-culture is deeply problematic; to do so would likely be considered by most an outright rejection of cultural norms and belonging. This is likely a legacy of Egypt's unequal relationship with the West. For Egyptian cultural producers throughout the last century, the West has been for Egypt both a supreme model of modernity against which Egyptian modernity is to be judged and a supreme (perhaps existential) cultural threat.[21] In other words, Egyptian cultural producers who aspire to reproduce Western modernity risk undermining what makes Egypt Egyptian.[22] They cannot merely emulate the modernity of the West, they have to authenticate it by fusing motifs which allude to both tradition and to modernity in popular culture (often in starkly didactic ways)—a feature of modern

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[21] Hisham Sharabi. 1988. *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Values in Arab Society* (Oxford University Press): p18

[22] To produce a culture which explicitly seeks to undo cultural norms without alluding to what is authentic is likely to be tagged as Western. A remarkable1957 Abdel Halim Hafez film demonstrates this point very well, and shows that these debates are not just about taboos and red lines but questions of authenticity. In the film, Abdel Halim Hafez's character, Khaled, falls in love with Salwa, the daughter of a well-respected doctor. But because his best friend Fathi also loves her, he asks Salwa's sister, Negwa, to marry him instead. Negwa and Khaled find out that in fact they are not suited, largely because Negwa's friend, Buthayna, is a bad influence who teaches her to dance and encourages her to value material wealth. Buthayna is also footloose and dangerously free, ultimately eloping with Fathi against Khaled's wishes. This is the ultimate sign of her leaving the community and rejecting outright its values. In the end Khaled opts to marry Salwa, not only his true love but also a woman who is in touch with her Egyptian-ness as much as her modernity. It is left to her father, the doctor, to bring Negwa back into line and remind her that freedom also involves responsibilities to family (and therefore to the nation). The film ties respect for patriarchy to authenticity, presenting unfettered freedom as a sell-out to the West. But most interestingly, the title—*Modern Girls* (*Banat El Yom*)—implies the movie is a treatise on how to succeed at being a modern woman and a good Egyptian. That the model female character in the film is glamorous, unveiled, and educated suggests that what is at stake is not so much about avoiding taboos as authenticating modern behavior.

mass culture in the Arab World which has been widely studied and observed.[23] Even if

today's Egyptian youth are increasingly exposed to the products of the global economy,

there is still a burden to authenticate emerging venues of cultural innovation (and cultural

borrowing from the West).[24] But anonymity removes the link between identity (and the

requirement for authenticity) and cultural commentary. Therefore, the anonymity blogs

provide gives their writers and readers more room for social critique with fewer demands

to uphold authenticity and fewer risks of peer alienation. In other words, confronting

social norms need not be taken as rejection of belonging. And this opens the gates to a

wider public to enter the fray.

     The emergence of small-scale personal blogs like Two Pairs of Eyes may not be

the beginning of a new era of liberalism in Egypt and the Arab World. But in the local

context of the writers' families, they could be highly significant. This is because there are

important ways in which personal blogs cannot be easily reconciled with traditional

notions of family structure and paternal authority common in Egypt. Most significantly,

Two Pairs of Eyes is necessarily interactive. A blog is only half a blog without readers,

comments and links to other bloggers. And because this networking depends on

reinforcing ties with both known readers and strangers met outside the family, it is a

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[23] Salamandra, Christa. 2004. *A New Old Damascus: Authenticity and Distinction in Urban Syria.*
Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press; Lila Abu-Lughod. 2004. *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.; Walter Armbrust. 1996. Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt. Cambridge University Press.

[24] Ultra-modern coffee shops in the Arab World modeled on the star of Starbucks often proclaim a local distinctiveness—my masters research took me to Inhouse Coffee, a Syrian chain styled on Starbucks down to the iconography, colour-scheme, comfy sofas, and sleek furnishings which was, as its manager insisted, distinctively Syrian (see http://users.ox.ac.uk/%7Emetheses/WeymanThesis.htm). The same is true of the Egyptian chain Cilantros. A recent series of hugely popular free concerts for 'invited' middle class youth in Cairo—SOS concerts as they are called—promote local bands who blend the best of Egyptian music with world pop and rock themes. Hijab fashion, now so popular in Egypt, combines elements of a global fashion industry with interpretations of acceptable wear in a patriarchal Islamic society.

direct threat to the constitution of social authority within the family. For a family to successfully socialize a child according to principles which cannot be relinquished without the loss of family credibility and social capital depends on it monitoring the relations of its children, particularly women. But by circumventing this, blogs reinforce social understandings derived not from within the family, but from outside it. Blogs do this through a process of active negotiation in which participants are more equal in status than in the family where power is culturally invested in the father.

Take, for example, Maat's aptly named post 'Venting' in which she lets off steam over what she sees as her father's over-protective style of parenting[25]:

> "I know I can't live on my own in this society unless I get widowed or divorced, even then I have my doubts, and I don't plan on leaving the house soon to… start my getting-widowed-or-divorced plan, so you better make it easier around here. I don't plan on living my 20s as a teenager. Put your mind at ease, give me a break, and back off a little."[26]

Maat not only seeks to express and share her frustrations, she also seeks agreement among her peers that her father's behavior is not justifiable. "So make up your mind," she tells her father in his absence, "you wanna treat me like a child or like a grown up? Cause you'r getting me really confused with your double standards."

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[25] Maat opens the post with an imaginary skit between her and her father in which he checks where she is going, what time she'll be back, and refuses to let her use the car in certain circumstances.
[26] http://nepeyes.blogspot.com/2006/12/venting.html

Maat's blogging peers, free from the watchful eye of her parents, are only too happy to confirm what she already believes: her father is wrong. "Double standards? more like quadruple standards + schizophrenia," says one peer, "this sucks!! give him sth else to worry about other than u," says another. [Maxxed`ouT](#) joins the throng with "parents could be such a pain sometimes." Maat is left in little doubt that she has the moral high-ground. So what to do about it? Nephthys inquires whether Maat will be asking her father to grant her more independence. Maat is not hopeful: "No i don't think i'll be telling hom [him] this, can't argue with him, and if so.. it'll be one thing at a time, and i wont win the argument." There could be no clearer demonstration of the fact that despite her venting, Maat knows her father still conveys authority in her life. She depends on him, financially and socially. But on her blog, Maat is guided by a set of blogging intimates who are not authority figures for her; they are peers who interact with her outside the scope of her parents' gaze, and in so doing, confirm what she already thinks.

Of course there are power relations in a blog. Maat and Nephthys defend their turf with the help of peer bloggers, and in some cases remove offensive comments from the thread. This shows how the blog acts to galvanize and affirm consensus views among peers. In the life of Two Pairs of Eyes, one instance of this process stands out: 'No Religion for me Please!' Given its confrontational tone, the post was bound to elicit a response. And it did so first from bo7a who said:

> "I have a good idea for you since you're so disgusted by religious people, you can go to
>
> the ministry of interior affairs and change your ID to atheist. And that way you can get

rid of all the retarded people telling you to pray. Yes sure the procedures might take a

while for this to be done so you can get rid of all those animals who keep nagging you to

do religious stuff, you can also go to a place where there are no Muslims and do whatever

you want. But you may as well stop watching tv because you're going to find them there.

And you can also file for some request to let them have Ramadan cancelled. Because it

seems to upset you that Ramadan is here."[27]

Maxxed `ouT responded first, telling bo7a to 'get a life' because "your comment

shows you don't understand a single thing she said," while N told Nephthys she was

'absolutely right' and should "stop bothering with anyone inflicting anything on you."[28]

But the consensus view of Two Pairs of Eyes was again punctured by another testing

comment, this time from an anonymous commenter who later revealed herself as Ola,

Maat's cousin from Alexandria. She told Nephthys to consider the meaning of a

community as "a group of people that have common values and shared aims so they can

work together to help each other reaching their target." Ironically, Ola's comment

identified the reason why Two Pairs of Eyes is such a potentially powerful medium—it

allows Maat and Nephthys to forge their own online community around shared values,

whilst remaining part of a wider national and religious community. But Ola saw the two

as incompatible given the flavour of Nephthys' post:

"For us Muslims we believe that it is our duty to encourage and take the hand of each

other to the road that we trust to be our way to heaven. If you don't fit in it is your choice

but we don't know that so either walk with a label "I am not one of you, I don't need

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[27] http://nepeyes.blogspot.com/2006/09/no-religion-for-me-please.html#comment-115793914724102531
[28] http://nepeyes.blogspot.com/2006/09/no-religion-for-me-please.html#comment-115795099931141406
http://nepeyes.blogspot.com/2006/09/no-religion-for-me-please.html#comment-115795712027028199

advise I have my own way" or if you find it so annoying you can search for another

community where you belong. weak [wake] up that is the majority low [law]. We cannot

change the whole for the sake of one."

Ola's criticism was an expression of the public alienation and isolation critics of social

and religious norms face in Egypt. It is precisely this argument which is so hard to tackle

in patriarchal and religious societies by those who seek alternatives—it essentially says,

if you criticize the norms you no longer belong. But Two Pairs of Eyes ensures, at least

for now, that Nephthys can reconcile her criticism with her public identity. Part of that

reconciliation is having friends support her on her patch. Here's what Maat had to say:

"as for anonymous, you mean well, but u still dont totally get the concept that nephthys is

talking about. who are "you" and "us"? what labels? those who go out of their way to

LOOK religious on the outside are the ones with labels, people who are natural,

confident, and just know what they're doing without needing outside forces to tell them

"ohh u'r soo goooood, u'll go straight to heaven", those people..ones like nephthys who

could be more religious at heart than many others, are the ones who don't need a label

and don't use a label. it's a pity how those need to be defensive of their beliefs at times"

Once again, Maat stuck to certain principles. She maintained that Nephthys is 'religious

at heart'—undermining Ola's claim that Nephthys could no longer 'fit in' with Muslims

because of her views. And in doing so she turned the debate away from a discussion

about religious *performance* to one about religious *belief*, furthering weakening Ola's

stance. But Ola's subsequent post returned to the idea that being a good Muslim involves

certain imperatives and commitments:

"This is what's holding us back from developing. In our religion everything is known. I

can't just pick what I want and leave the rest. And by the way Mrs, preaching or trying

to get people to be more religious is actually a must. The prophet, peace be upon him,

said that you should deliver my message even if it's one quranic verse. To all of you

people your thinking should be more developed than that, we should start thinking about

how to get our umma back to the way it used to be at the time of the prophet. And this

can only happen through preaching and talking about religion all the time to different

people."

At the crux of the debate lay questions about acceptable dissent in Islam. A question

which relates to Muslims' attitudes to non-Muslims also betrayed participants' opinions

about how far Muslims should accept diversity within the Umma. For the blog's favorite

readers, the answer was clear. "Just try to accept the variety of colors between black and

white," Insomniac advised Ola, because "Islam is all about tolerance." The irony was that

she and others could not tolerate Ola's view—one commenter even described it as

'offensive'.[29]

The point is, though, that the peer bloggers closed ranks and protected the

consensus view expressed by Nephthys from a newcomer. This allowed Nephthys to say,

"i dont have much to reply to u coz others did the job better than me."[30] The ability to

express oneself is never equal on a blog. The self-defined community of peer bloggers

ensures the consensus view prevails.

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[29] http://nepeyes.blogspot.com/2006/09/no-religion-for-me-please.html#comment-115808111351038137
[30] http://nepeyes.blogspot.com/2006/09/no-religion-for-me-please.html#comment-115809981071684554

Taking part in this game is itself self-reinforcing. Clearly debates like these involve intellectually demanding tasks—reading, commenting, synthesizing opinions, posting—which are by definition actively learnt and used. These are skills which are likely transferable to other contexts and media. Not only this, but the process of becoming a 'blogger' who actively writes, posts, comments and responds, is a process which would reinforce the need to seek social discussion, comparison, and exchange with peers online, rather than seeking this within private family space or avoiding it altogether.

Blogs also require a level of computer literacy which is not easily conveyed down from parents to children. The internet is, in effect, a medium that would tend to empower those who are currently being socialized through it (young generations today) over those who were not brought up in the internet age. Parental control over computers and financial access to the medium aside, for young educated Arabs the internet is *their* social realm to a much greater extent than older generations. The exploration of new formats, social networks such as Facebook and Hi 5, games, and forums present young people keen to extend their social boundaries with not only an incentive to increase their IT awareness, but also to take part in new forms of interaction their parents find hard to get to grips with. This is particularly true of new linguistic codes and interactive etiquette online which emerge first and fastest amongst the young. Formerly, codes of youth culture would be learnt by middle class children mainly in environments—educational, religious, and 'extra-curricula' institutions (such as Scouts and Student Unions)—and through media—television, radio, magazines—in which the state and family held a

central stake and could extend a controlling hand. This is no longer true of blogs. Clearly

modern spaces in which young people hold the reins have emerged before. The

development of mass education provided young people with the opportunity to write for

pleasure outside the control of 'illiterate' parents[31]. In more recent times, cinemas

provided dark semi-private spaces where state messages could be challenged and social

norms disobeyed.[32] But few spaces have given young people such decisive power to

shape their own agenda.

It is the combination of these elements—the youthfulness, interactivity, and

anonymity of blogs—which allows for subversive politics, both towards state power and

towards family authority. By retaining their anonymity, Maat and Nephthys can feel

comfortable sharing their lives both with those who are close to them in the knowledge

their identity cannot be verified by their family, and those who are unknown to them.

This interaction of the known and the unknown which is so compelling. As with other

forms of media—newspapers, television channels, radio stations—a community of users

emerges. And because blogs are not easily constrained by external authority, users can

seek a social reference point for exploring alternative identities and reinforcing their

world views. They may build common understandings, linguistic codes, systems of

etiquette without reference to external authority figures. But, as the free web count for

Two Pairs of Eyes shows—the blog has had over 13,000 hits since May 2006—the

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[31] Lucie Ryzova (University of Oxford): "'My notepad is my friend' Efendis and the act of
writing in Modern Egypt." A research paper presented at "The Formation of National Culture in Egypt:
Social, Cultural and Ideological Trajectories" conference, the University of Oxford, January 2007
[32] Armbrust, Walter. 2006. "When the lights go down in Cairo: Cinema as Global Crossroads and Space of
Playful Resistance." in Diane Singerman and Paul Amar (eds.) *Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics, Culture, and
Urban Space in the New Middle East* American University in Cairo Press.

engagement with this loosely defined in-group is much wider. The blog is available to
readers online anywhere, who witness this communal self-definition and have the
opportunity to contest it. In this way, the blog is used as a means for constructing an in-
group, primarily though not uniquely on Maat and Nephthys' terms, and for this in-group
to interact with a wider Egyptian and Arab public.

A new venue for the 'global' middle class

The blog and its identity

The fate of Egypt's middle classes as played out through media over the last
century has been a recurrent theme for scholars. This is not just because Cairo has been a
powerful draw for researchers, but because the emerging Egyptian middle classes have
been seen as the drivers of Arab modernity in much of the media output of the twentieth
century. From film to literature, radio to television *musalsals,* Egyptian middle classes
have long played a galvanizing central role, thus shaping emerging identities and lending
a confidence to the work of aligning state and nationhood. But in more recent times,
seismic shifts have been taking place to unsettle this picture. Economic stagnation, the
failure of post-independence state-led modernizing drives, and their declining role in the
region's media have hit Egypt's middle classes hard. The cultural landscape has changed
from one in which Egyptian middle classes held a controlling stake as gatekeepers and
bringers of a newly confident national high culture, to one in which the gates have been
irrevocably flooded by cultural products—both imported and domestic—that
continuously evade the sanctioning process of the state.

One snapshot of this change has been the decline in Cairo's entertainment district, particularly during the 1990s, and the flight of its traditionally middle class cinema-going public, a trend documented by Walter Armbrust.[33] Armbrust shows how the cinemas which middle class Egyptians could afford had decreased dramatically already by the early 1990s, giving way to expensive cinemas only accessible to Gulf 'tourists' with money, and to a new middle class 'in global terms'. In the process, Egypt's youth, financially unable to marry and socially unauthorized to explore sex, had lost a social space in which the semi-privacy of darkness allowed for breaking social conventions. Young unmarried Egyptians, argues Armbrust, have retreated to the satellite small screen where the 'watchful eyes of adults' are pervasive.

But what was true of the 1990s is less true now. Out of these associated trends—economic stagnation, social decline and the indefinite extension of 'youth' (a period between childhood and marriage)—has emerged a new generation of 'global' middle class youth, if not allied to global capital then exposed widely to global aspiration. Brought up on satellite television, the new medium through which this generation seeks self-definition is increasingly one which offers privacy cinema goers of the 90s could have only dreamed of: the internet. Central to the internet's allure is a capacity for social exploration, uncensored by either state or family. While hugely popular social networking sites Hi, Facebook, Bebo and MySpace offer, if not demand, that young 'global' Egyptians explore new avenues for public interaction largely bypassing social

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[33] Armbrust, Walter. 2006. "When the lights go down in Cairo: Cinema as Global Crossroads and Space of Playful Resistance." in Diane Singerman and Paul Amar (eds.) *Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics, Culture, and Urban Space in the New Middle East* American University in Cairo Press.

conventions deemed indisputable elsewhere, personal blogs provide the anonymity

necessary for not only bypassing but *critiquing* those norms.

Personal blogs like Two Pairs of Eyes have come to have a vibrant role in the

exploration and construction of identity for this emerging 'global' middle class Egyptian

youth. This is reflected by the fact that many bloggers write both in English and Arabic.

A cursory look at the related blogs listed on the right navigation bar of Two Pairs of

Eyes—blogs Maat and Nephthys read and comment on—shows that a sizeable proportion

combine elements in English and in Arabic. Another feature is the emergence of a

flexible (though increasingly stabilizing) style of 'anglo-Arabic' which involves writing a

spoken form of Cairene Arabic using Latin script. The flux between these three 'codes'

is likely to be highly significant. It shows that Egypt's well-educated literate young may

prefer to write in English than to write in high Fusha Arabic. Maat certainly thinks so.

Her English is so good, she actually finds it much easier to write in English than in

Arabic.[34] It also suggests an orienting towards a global readership in an internet world

which defies borders. Maat and Nephthys's use of English makes perfect sense when

considered against the backdrop of an internet dominated by English, much of which they

have access to and use. But also it is possible that writing in English allows them to be

more critical—a feature of Arab media across the region.[35] Although English gives them

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[34] Maat and Nephthys studied at the more Arabic leaning Cairo University, not the English-language American University in Cairo.

[35] It is widely thought that the government sponsored *Al Ahram Weekly* can defy government censorship to a greater extent than its Arabic language cousin because it is in English. Similarly, the Arabic-language and English-language websites of *Asharq Alawsat* show noticeable differences of tone—columnist Mona Eltahawy even found whole sections of her articles being erased in the Arabic version of the site. In research I conducted for my M.Phil thesis, I found that the Syrian version of a youth magazine, *Star*, preserved the most paparazzi sections of its Lebanese cousin because they were in English and related to

access to a wider terrain, it also excludes many in their native Egypt. A frequent tactic

used by peer bloggers to defend Two Pairs of Eyes from critical newcomers is the charge

that a commenter has inadequate English to understand the post. But perhaps the most

interesting feature of this language flux is the fact that anglo-Arabic is often the

commenting language of choice, whereas Maat and Nephthys tend to write posts in

English or Fusha. This plays into the idea that spoken Cairene Arabic is not a 'proper'

written language. A formal post must carry some weight and convey an idea to a wider

public than a comment—therefore anglo-Arabic is not considered sufficient. The rare

cases where Maat has used anglo-Arabic extensively in a post, she has felt it necessary to

apologize afterwards.[36] Anglo-Arabic, on the other hand, is purposefully flexible so that

words can be extended for emphasis, fillers can be used to express a conversational style,

and in-jokes can be conveyed. And of course, it is much easier on a computer to code

switch between two languages using the same alphabet. This often means Latin script is

the script of choice for writing in Arabic, and a conversational spoken style is the chosen

tone. The code switching between anglo-Arabic and English—which is common on Two

Pairs of Eyes—is highly dynamic, and reminds us that, though globally accessible and

locally exclusive, this blog is run to the tempo of Egyptian lives.

Conclusion

Blogs are being used to explore if not challenge social values by Egypt's global

middle class.   The medium has the potential for the development of community

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foreign stars. The provocative Arabic language paparazzi sections were removed from the Syrian
magazine.
[36] "*excuse the anglo-arab.... i know it's annoying but there was no way i'd be able to write all that in arabic
letters... if i wanted to post it within this month that is." http://nepeyes.blogspot.com/2007/04/el-
tamatem.html

sensibility that is built from the ground up, outside the family and the state, which would be hard to sustain elsewhere. Egypt's emerging global class is using blogs to imagine, if not create online, a less patriarchal society. The question remains whether this online conversation has transformative power in the real world. My response to this question would be threefold. First, the internet is likely to grow and enable more conversations that challenge norms and construct online communities in the future. Second, the very fact that this conversation is taking place is important and transformative in its own right. It allows Nephthys to reconcile her faith with a desire for a public sphere that emphasizes greater pluralism, it provides Maat with the opportunity to vent about her dad and reassure herself that his decisions are not indisputable, and it provides the community of peer bloggers with a vision of how they would like their social reality to look. All this would be much harder to sustain in any other medium. Third, blogs like Two Pairs of Eyes may take time to impact upon individual trajectories, but the evidence is there that the blog's users will go through life more assured of their own sense of belonging. As Hurricane_x says pointedly, "I guess when we become older we'll tell our children the exact things they told u,...(I'll hate myself if I changed my point of view when I get old!)."[37]

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[37] http://nepeyes.blogspot.com/2007/05/baaaad-world.html#comment-4267845953218847642

kamera.com producing news scripts and voice overs. He has also worked as a researcher on Arab media for the Panos Institute in London and has experience at Sky News.