



Historicizing Arab blogs: Reflections on the transmission of ideas and information in Middle Eastern history

By Brian Ulrich

Spring, 2009. Arab blogs have caught the attention of Middle East watchers. Much of the attention dedicated to them, however, has dealt with their political importance, whether as a mobilizing tool for activists or as an alternative source of news reporting. Blogging is also interesting, however, as a new and perhaps significant departure in the history of media in the Middle East. By this I do not mean “media” in the common late 20th century usage in which it applies primarily to those who work within unidirectional mass media, but rather as a medium of communication. In particular, I am interested in the way media enables and structures relationships between and among senders and receivers of ideas and information, as well as in the mechanisms of reception of messages and the perceptions of media forms and transmitters which circumscribe their authority.

This article is not designed to answer such questions, but to raise them through a brief survey of the immediate impacts of new media forms as currently understood by historians. Its approach to the history of technology is that while new media forms can enable certain changes in social practices, both the development of new forms and their utilization and impact are heavily, if not decisively, influenced by cultural, social, economic, and political factors. The intent is to use this survey to provide a general background giving rise to new comparisons and models which scholars may find useful, both in evaluating blogging in the Middle East as an activity and situating it in its historical context. It is necessarily preliminary, as many topics within the history of communication in the region require further investigation.

Parchment to print

In her study of blogging in the United States and Western Europe, Jill Walker Rettberg examined blogs in terms of their similarity to other forms of mass media introduced across centuries. For Rettberg, printed texts represented the first true mass media, and she suggested that blogs represent a similar increase in the ability to make texts available to wide audiences.¹ In the Arab context, we should note the introduction of paper nearly one thousand years before print, when the Abbasid dynasty sought to provide for the needs of government bureaucracy by supporting a paper industry to replace the expensive parchment and rare papyrus.² Once readily available, paper became the

medium for a vibrant book industry allowing for the rapid dissemination of knowledge in a number of fields.³

Greater availability of writing materials did not lead quickly to a culture of learning which privileged writing. Gregor Schoeler has demonstrated the ways in which writing was used to support rather than supplant oral transmission, with shaykhs using notes during lectures to students, who took their own notes as study aids for an oral evaluation process.⁴ Simply studying a book on one's own was thought to open the door to errors of understanding which a learned shaykh could correct.⁵ Even when the idea of books as fixed texts became dominant in the ninth and tenth centuries, orality and chains of transmission remained important. Books were usually dictated to scribes who checked their work through oral recitation back to the authority whose work they were transcribing, and guaranteed authenticity of the contents depended on a chain of authorizations leading back to the original author.⁶ Such means of transmitting knowledge continued to have currency in the Arab world deep into the Ottoman period, though there were increasing exceptions, particularly in the rational sciences.⁷ The ruling powers, which before long became culturally alien military elites, supported this work through *waqf* endowments and appointments to judgeships, as well as more direct forms of patronage. Both women and men participated in the transmission of knowledge in the premodern Middle East, though women's participation was often limited by the value placed on gender segregation.⁸ Knowledge was also not limited to the elite, the members of the general public were instructed orally in religious knowledge by *ulama*.⁹

The first printing presses in the Ottoman capital of Istanbul were opened by Jewish immigrants (1492) and Armenians (1567).¹⁰ The first printing in Ottoman Turkish was authorized during the reign of Ahmed III by Ibrahim Muteferrika, who in trying to sell the project "cited benefits for the masses needing instruction and for the ruling classes and the benefit of perpetuating books by printing them when manuscripts could be or had been destroyed by war."¹¹ This statement represents a sense on the part of some in the Ottoman elite that mass production leads to permanence. The resulting *firman* permitted printing only in practical sciences, and not religious fields.¹² Printing did not truly catch on, however, until the 19th century, and particularly its last quarter. One survey shows that, within the Ottoman Empire and across the fields of literature, positive science, religion, and governments, the period from 1820 until 1839 saw the publication of 217 titles, that from 1840 until 1876 had 2468 titles, and the period from 1876 until 1908 gave rise to 9094.¹³ This seems to reflect the situation in the predominantly Arab provinces, as well, for despite some Arabic printing by Syrian Christians and in Muhammad Ali's Egypt, private printing did not become an important business in Egypt until the 1870's.¹⁴

According to Juan Cole, an important precondition for this was a rise in literacy generated by the new Egyptian education programs designed to staff the bureaucracy.¹⁵ Kemal Karpat takes this analysis further, arguing that education for service in Ottoman bureaucracies, which increased first during the Tanzimat period and again under

Abdulhamid II, created a new class of elites imbued with then-current ideas of modernity and characterized by a receptivity to reconfigured geometries of identity supported by new media forms.¹⁶ In particular, pan-Islamic sentiments spread through newspapers, which as Benedict Anderson pointed out is “a book sold on a colossal scale, but of ephemeral popularity.”¹⁷ Karpas highlights *Basiret* as the primary organ of Ottoman pan-Islamism,¹⁸ while Cole notes the importance of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad ‘Abduh’s *al-Urwa al-Wuthqa* and ‘Abd Allah al-Nadim’s *Tankit wa Tabkit* and *al-Ta’if*, the latter of which became the chief organ of the ‘Urabi movement.¹⁹

Print culture affected the transmission of ideas and knowledge in the Middle East in several ways. Those unable to access traditional perches of authority could popularize their ideas through print-related entrepreneurship. Jamal al-Din al-Afghani’s formal theological training was not extensive enough for him to earn any formal credentials, and if he had it might have narrowed rather than expanded his potential audience on account of his Shi’ism.²⁰ Nonetheless, he was able to become the father of the broad movement of Islamic reformism because of print publications. Such publications were able to reach the illiterate as well as the literate, as the educated read them aloud to an audience in coffeehouses and other venues.²¹ This marked a practice of communication in which oral dissemination served to extend the reach of written texts, with education rather than intellectual trustworthiness as the basis of authority. The ready availability of printed Qur’ans and commentaries also helped sustain a movement among Sunnis toward greater acceptance of *ijtihad*, which depended on direct access to those texts.²² Furthermore, as Albert Hourani notes, al-Afghani displayed a sense of the *umma* that would have been difficult to maintain before his era in that, “The centre of attention is no longer Islam as a religion, it is rather Islam as a civilization.”²³ Cole termed him a “Muslim nationalist” suggesting a receptivity within society to new horizontally circumscribed identities often associated with rituals of print.²⁴

In 1871, an Istanbul-based Lebanese journalist named Ahmad Faris ash-Shidyaq wrote of how *ulama* and poets became increasingly involved in political discussions when exposed to newspapers. The Young Ottoman intellectual Namik Kemal associated print culture with a simpler writing style that had mass appeal. Muhammad ‘Abduh compared newspapers to mosque preachers, an indication of the close association of print with oral forms of idea transmission in popular perception in the late 19th century.²⁵ Other associates of al-Afghani actively called upon mosque preachers to disseminate news during their sermons.²⁶ Some satirical political publications even used Egyptian Colloquial Arabic, making them even more accessible to the less educated public.²⁷

Women also benefited from the new media form. The first publications dedicated to women’s issues appeared during the Tanzimat period (1839-1876). Under Abdulhamid II, an official women’s press, “promoted a new idealized image of a Muslim mother and wife, who shopped at Muslim stores and raised obedient, pious children.” This was followed under the Young Turks by a press which “gave vent to more liberal voices, and discussed a much broader range of issues, including sensitive ones like feminism, universal suffrage, and gender discrimination.”²⁸ Cole has noted that in Egypt, women

such as Malak Hifni Nasif could participate much more easily in debates mediated by print than they could prior to its popularization.²⁹ The press was also not limited to politics, for, as Elizabeth B. Frierson notes, “Readers...wrote letters to endorse places of business or to protest high prices, and they fiercely debated moral-freighted products such as the corset.”³⁰

Print culture in the Arab world, however, also developed in an environment of increasingly strong governments. Under Abdulhamid II, the Ottoman Empire practiced rigorous censorship of politically sensitive books and newspapers.³¹ The same was true under colonial powers, whose rule saw the growth of new, linguistically defined forms of nationalism. The most open periods were during what William Rugh has called the “factional phases,” where different groups competed for power within individual countries, thus diversifying the base of capital needed for printing, as well as preventing a monopoly of coercive potential. By the late 20th century, all newspapers printed in the Arab world were in a situation where they were expected to support the regime of the country where they were based.³² The taboos maintained, however, varied by country.

The mighty electron

This was the environment in which radio first became an important component of the Arab media landscape. Although radio began in Egypt during the 1920's, Gamal Abdel Nasser developed it both as a means of nationalization and to broadcast the regime's perspectives on contemporary issues throughout the Arab world. Other nationalist regimes, such as Iraq and Syria, soon followed.³³ More traditionalist regimes, such as Jordan, failed to compete with the nationalist broadcasts.³⁴ Marc Lynch characterizes Egypt's Voice of the Arabs as featuring, “little rational argument, and much invective and fierce rhetoric.”³⁵ Research on the reception of these perspectives by listeners, however, remains badly needed. Listening seems often to have taken place in groups, such as in coffeehouses.³⁶ In a striking interview recorded by Madawi al-Rasheed, a former ARAMCO worker from Najd recalls listening to radio broadcasts on significant regional issues with other workers from around the Arab world in 1953. The worker said that all he wanted to buy for himself with his wages was a radio to listen to those broadcasts.³⁷

That worker's remarks suggest that, while not a “public sphere,” Voice of the Arabs cannot be dismissed as simple propaganda. People will simply lose interest in media sources without credibility. Rugh has suggested that people's low trust in official state media has led to a persistent importance in oral communication among personal networks in the transmission of information.³⁸ Nasser had influence because his message resonated with a significant number of Arabs. At the same time, it both reflected the state's ability to dominate means of mass communication, while seeking to, and perhaps succeeding in, placing ultimate authority in Nasser as the great leader who embodied the nation. Rugh traces the state's ability to control broadcast media to the significant start-up costs and a higher level of state interest in controlling radio and television due to their massive reach. He also notes that radio expanded under strong governments and thus had no tradition of independence.³⁹ This, however, may miss the

critical point that it expanded precisely because the governments sought to use its aforementioned reach. Broadcast media not only existed under state control; it existed because the state desired it.⁴⁰ The tradition of carrying advertising in blocks between programs may reflect an original sensitivity to the fact that state-sponsored radio was a political, rather than commercial venture, and programmers did not want ads to interrupt the content of shows regardless of the loss in their effectiveness.⁴¹ Charles Hirschkind has located Nasserist programming within a history of agentive listening.⁴² More directly relevant to blogs, however, is the manner in which radio drew listeners into the imagined community of Arabic language and culture and shared projects of advancement for that community under Nasser's leadership.

A further transformation of the Arab media landscape took place during the 1990's with the rise of satellite television. Previous Arab television stations were driven by the same political concerns as radio, and sought to either promote a political agenda or counter one by providing alternative programming.⁴³ The new satellite stations, however, although linked to ruling families from the Arabian Peninsula, were driven in whole or part by commercial considerations.⁴⁴ Although difficult to measure, consumer demand played an increased role in determining content, making public opinion important in the competitive satellite TV market.⁴⁵ Lynch has highlighted al-Jazeera in particular as a key component of "a genuine public sphere, characterized by self-conscious, open, and contentious political argument before a vast but discrete audience" which shaped "not only public attitudes but also conceptions of political identity and the strategies of all political actors."⁴⁶ The unidirectional character of mass media during the 20th century has been somewhat revised by open call-in shows in real time. Anyone who has frequented coffeehouses in the Arab world can also testify that people often watch in public groups, as well as through home satellite dishes. At the same time, practical controls limit the ability of any given individual to participate in the discussions and broadcast their voice to the community.

In the second half of the 20th century, an important alternative to state-regulated media developed in the form of audio cassettes. In the Iranian context, Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ali Mohammadi have famously studied how cassettes played a role in the 1979 revolution.⁴⁷ Many cassettes are produced cheaply by individuals and disseminated through personal networks below the radar of state censorship. Flagg Miller has examined the role of cassette poetry in Yemen, where it is marshaled in both disputes among tribes and popular dissatisfaction with the government.⁴⁸ Far more common, however, are cassettes tied to discourses related to Islam. One Yemeni shop included both live and studio oral performances on spiritual and political topics, as well as songs, discussions and scripted dialogues.⁴⁹ Hirschkind quotes Egyptians who say that cassette sermons are a superior form of informative media to that run under the aegis of the state.⁵⁰ Once again, listening is frequently communal and gives rise to discussion and debate over the issues raised.⁵¹

Blogging and new rituals of engagement

Cassettes deserve mention as a possibly significant point of comparison for blogs. Both emerged among those culturally linked to the medium and were used to express dissent with the established order. Sermons have long been an important part of the Islamic Revival, and had been recorded on tape since the early 20th century.⁵² The origins of blogging are tied to those with an interest in computers. Lynch characterizes the first wave of Arab bloggers as, “young, technologically-oriented, and politically unengaged.”⁵³ Although it seems intuitively that blog reading before a computer screen would represent a break with the common practice of group reception of information seen in previous media forms, the existence of comment threads on many blogs may introduce a new element to that dynamic, as within virtual space time becomes more malleable and physical absence insignificant as those reading a post participate in a shared experience of the presented ideas and engage in discussion, not only with each other, but frequently with their originator in a new form of social rituals of engagement.

It is in such open rituals of engagement that blogs’ true revolutionary potential may lie. As suggested by the term “cyberspace,” the on-line creates a virtual space for the interaction of individuals regardless of physical distance. If this is the case, then within the history of the Middle East, the most apt comparison may not be to a media form, but rather to the rise of the coffeehouse as a new space for community interaction. Ralph Hattox’s study is potentially instructive. As he says: “In place of newspapers or public forums, the coffeehouse quickly became the place of exchange of information, where news of the palace or Porte was spread by word of mouth...A forum for the public ventilation of news, views and grievances concerning the state possessed the potential for becoming a political ‘clubhouse’ from which concerted action might be taken by those with a common distaste for the regime.”⁵⁴ In addition, coffeehouses were the sites of much less controversial conversation, as well as games and entertainment, in keeping with the multitude of topics addressed by blogs.⁵⁵

If the internet represents a new public space in the Middle East, then many of its characteristics are shaped by the physical world within which it is embedded. For example, many blogs are most commonly found through national aggregators, such as Bahrain Blogs.⁵⁶ This has implications for the types of community created around a particular blog or between blogs. At the same time, the anonymity for which blogging provides makes it tempting for those seeking to escape an architecture of isolation created by the interface of their identity with that of those around them. As Courtney Radsch writes about Egypt: “As the blogosphere expanded and diversified, identity communities began to form. Bloggers who identified themselves as homosexual, Coptic, Bahai, and *salafi* created blogs and commented on each others’ posts.”⁵⁷ Sharon Otterman⁵⁸ and George Weyman⁵⁹ have both written excellent studies of women’s use of blogging in this fashion. Such involvement would have been all but impossible with previous media forms where a combination of convention and the frequent need for at least some physical communication rendered anonymity problematic.

This democratizing feature of blogs may be the most important. In most forms of mass media, some members of publicly marginalized groups have been able to participate in discussions of sensitive issues. However, the much lower barrier to entry for blogs, which require only the rapidly spreading internet access, means that anyone can jump in. Someone who would find it either impossible, or only possible with an unacceptable level of sacrifice, to say what they have to say in other formats will often find it easier to work behind an on-line pseudonym. At the same time, much as many in the 16th century Ottoman Empire looked down at coffeehouses, so its use to oppose dominant social discourses may discredit blogging in the eyes of many, as Radsch noted is already happening with some Egyptian professionals in response to bloggers' political activism.⁶⁰ The social, cultural, and political conditions which inspire many to blog affect not only its pattern of voices, but the patterns of perception of the medium itself. At the same time, as economic imperatives dictate the spread of the internet which enables it, blogging holds out the potential of creating new perceptions of and means of exercising authority in the distribution of ideas based on the interaction of otherwise unknown on-line personas with given communities of interest. Given the importance of knowledge and ideas to social construction, the potential is there to shift the forces which help shape society itself.

Brian Ulrich is a visiting assistant professor of history at Colgate University in Hamilton, New York. He is currently working on a book project concerning Arab tribalism during the caliphates. He also blogs on topics related to the Middle East at American Footprints and Brian's Coffeehouse.

¹ Jill Walker Rettberg, *Blogging*, (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2008), pp. 32-8.

² Jonathan M. Bloom, *Paper before Print: The History and Impact of Paper in the Islamic World*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 48-9.

³ Bloom, pp. 110-6.

⁴ Gregor Schoeler, *The Oral and the Written in Early Islam*, tr. Uwe Vagelpohl, ed. James E. Montgomery, (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 45.

⁵ Jonathan Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo: A Social History of Islamic Education*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 24-6. See also Francis Robinson, "Technology and Religious Change: Islam and the Impact of Print," *Modern Asian Studies* 27 (1993), p. 237-8.

⁶ Bloom, pp. 113-5.

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- ⁷ Juan R.I. Cole, "Printing and Urban Islam in the Mediterranean World, 1890-1920," *Modernity and Culture from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean*, ed. Leila Tarazi Fawaz and C.A. Bayly, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 348.
- ⁸ Berkey, pp. 167-81.
- ⁹ Berkey, pp. 201-16.
- ¹⁰ Bloom, p. 221. Francis Robinson gives the Jewish date as 1493 in Robinson, p. 233.
- ¹¹ Bloom, p. 222.
- ¹² Bloom, p. 222.
- ¹³ Kemal H. Karpat, *The Politicization of Islam: Reconstructing Identity, State, Faith and Community in the Late Ottoman State*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 134.
- ¹⁴ Cole, "Printing and Urban Islam," pp. 349-50. The Ottomans brought the first printing press to Yemen in 1877. Brinkley Messick, *The Calligraphic State: Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 115.
- ¹⁵ Cole, "Printing and Urban Islam," p. 350.
- ¹⁶ Karpat, pp. 101-3.
- ¹⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised Edition, (London: Verso, 1991), p. 34.
- ¹⁸ Karpat, pp. 119-22.
- ¹⁹ Cole, "Printing and Urban Islam," p. 355.
- ²⁰ Cole, "Printing and Urban Islam," p. 355.
- ²¹ Juan R.I. Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East: Social and Cultural Origins of Egypt's 'Urabi Movement*, (Cairo: The University of Cairo Press, 1999), pp. 112, 115.
- ²² Cole, "Printing and Urban Islam," p. 354.
- ²³ Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 114.
- ²⁴ Cole, "Printing and Urban Islam," p. 344; Anderson, pp. 34-5.
- ²⁵ Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution*, pp. 116-8.
- ²⁶ Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), pp. 42-3.
- ²⁷ Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution*, p. 124.

²⁸ M. Sukru Hanioglu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 183.

²⁹ Cole, "Printing and Urban Islam," pp. 358-9.

³⁰ Elizabeth B. Frierson, "Cheap and Easy: The Creation of Consumer Culture in Late Ottoman Society," *Consumption Studies and the History of the Ottoman Empire, 1550-1922: An Introduction*, ed. Donald Quataert, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), p. 247.

³¹ Karpas, pp. 133-4.

³² William A. Rugh, *Arab Mass Media: Newspapers, Radio, and Television in Arab Politics*, (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), pp. 43-58. This has a detailed discussion of the history of the environment for newspapers in different countries during the 20th century.

³³ Rugh, pp. 184-5.

³⁴ Rugh pp. 190-2.

³⁵ Marc Lynch, *Voices of the New Arab Public: Iraq, al-Jazeera, and Middle East Politics Today*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 36.

³⁶ Paul Starkey, "Modern Egyptian culture in the Arab world," *The Cambridge History of Egypt, Vol. II: Modern Egypt from 1517 to the End of the Twentieth Century*, ed. M.W. Daly, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 424.

³⁷ Madawi al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 97-8.

³⁸ Rugh, pp. 12-3.

³⁹ Rugh, pp. 181-2.

⁴⁰ The importance of the state in 20th century development in the Middle East could also be marshaled as an explanation for the lack of alternate forms of radio technology in the region. On the predominance of unidirectional broadcast media, see Rettberg, pp. 53-5.

⁴¹ Rugh, pp. 182-3.

⁴² Hirschkind, pp. 50-4.

⁴³ Rugh, pp. 186-8, 192-4.

⁴⁴ Rugh, pp. 211-22.

⁴⁵ Fatima Mernissi, "The Satellite, the Prince, and Shaherazad: Women as Communicators in Digital Islam," *On Shifting Ground: Muslim Women in the Global Era*, ed. Fereshteh Nourae-Simone, (New York: The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 2005), pp. 7-10.

⁴⁶ Lynch, *Voices*, pp. 247-8, and passim for much of this section.

⁴⁷ Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ali Mohammadi, *Small Media, Big Revolution: Communication, Culture and the Iranian Revolution*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

⁴⁸ Flagg Miller, *The Moral Resonance of Arab Media: Audiocassette Poetry and Culture in Yemen*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 84-98.

⁴⁹ Miller, pp. 76-7.

⁵⁰ Hirschkind, pp. 115-6.

⁵¹ For just two examples, see Miller, pp. 89-96, and Hirschkind, pp. 118-20.

⁵² Hirschkind, pp. 54-60.

⁵³ Marc Lynch, "Blogging the New Arab Public," *Arab Media & Society* (February 2007), pdf p. 6.

⁵⁴ Ralph S. Hattox, *Coffee and Coffeehouses: The Origins of a Social Beverage in the Medieval Near East*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985), pp. 101-2.

⁵⁵ Hattox, pp. 98-111.

⁵⁶ <http://www.barhainblogs.org>

⁵⁷ Courtney Radsch, "Core to Commonplace: The evolution of Egypt's blogosphere," *Arab Media & Society*, (September 2008), pdf p. 7.

⁵⁸ Sharon Otterman, "Publicizing the Private: Egyptian Women Bloggers Speak Out," *Arab Media & Society* (February 2007).

⁵⁹ George Weyman, "Personal Blogging in Egypt: pushing social boundaries or reinforcing them?" *Arab Media & Society*, (October 2007).

⁶⁰ Radsch, pdf p. 11.