

## Blogging the New Arab Public

Blog enthusiasts pinning great hopes upon the transformative impact of online personal Web logs have often seemed to run ahead of political reality.<sup>1</sup> A few years ago, in fact, Arab blogs could easily be written off as a fad, fueled by the novelty of some outspoken female Saudi bloggers and the prominence of some English-language Iraqi blogs in the American political blogosphere. There are still plenty of reasons to believe that blogs will never live up to their hype.<sup>2</sup> Blogging remains the activity of a tiny elite, as only a small minority of the already microscopic fraction of Arabs who regularly use the Internet actually write or read blogs. Blogs reach only a fraction of the audience of Al Jazeera or even of tedious state-dominated newspapers. Where bloggers have been politically influential, such as Egypt and Bahrain, repressive regimes have been able to crack down on them. From this perspective, it is highly unlikely that blogging will induce wide political change in the Middle East.

While a healthy skepticism is wise, it would be wrong to conclude that blogging has no role in Arab politics. Arab political blogging is changing and becoming more

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<sup>1</sup> For helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay, I would like to thank Henry Farrell, Mona el-Ghobhashy, Issandr El Amrani, Ethan Zuckerman, and George Weyman, though of course all errors are mine.

<sup>2</sup> Jon Alterman, "The Information Revolution and the Middle East," in Daniel Byman and Nora Bensahel, eds., *The Future Security Environment in the Middle East* (Washington DC: RAND), pp.224-251; Albrecht Hofheinz, "The Internet in the Arab World: Playground for Political Liberalization." *Zeitschrift: Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft* 3, no.3 (2006) [http://www.fes.de/IPG/arc\\_05\\_set/set\\_03\\_05d.htm](http://www.fes.de/IPG/arc_05_set/set_03_05d.htm)

politically relevant. Bloggers have had a discernible impact in a wide range of Arab countries, including their role in the Kefaya movement in Egypt (see Rania Al Malky in this issue), political protests in Bahrain (see Luke Schleusener), the turbulent post-Al Hariri period in Lebanon (see Sune Haugbolle), anti-corruption campaigns in Libya (see Claudia Gazzini) and the 2006 Kuwaiti elections. While political opportunities usually come first—around elections, national scandals, or contentious elite debates, for instance—blogs can be catalysts for previously unlikely political mobilization.<sup>3</sup> A raft of recent articles have begun to explore the new politics of Arab blogs, especially their role in facilitating new forms of political activism.<sup>4</sup> Mainstream Arab media have taken note as well, as in a breathless segment on Al Jazeera last year dubbed *Blogs: the New Opposition Voice in Arab Politics* in which veteran journalist Mohammed Hasanayn Haykal declared himself the greatest reader of blogs.<sup>5</sup> Do blogs represent a revolutionary new tool for Arab political mobilization? Can they break the filter of state-controlled media and give both non-Arabs and Arabs themselves direct access to real Arab voices? Can they provide the foundations for a new Arab public sphere?

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<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Alaa Abd al-Fattah (<http://www.manalaa.net/>) for this formulation; interview, January 14, 2007, Cairo.

<sup>4</sup> Negar Azimi, "Blogging Against Torture," *The Nation*, February 19, 2007 (available at <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20070219/azimi/2>); Gal Beckerman, "The New Arab Conversation," *Columbia Journalism Review* (January/February 2007) (available at <http://www.cjr.org/issues/2007/1/Beckerman.asp>); "The Arab blogosphere," Bitter Lemons International roundtable with Ammar Abdulhamid, Mona Eltahawy, Esra'a al-Shafei, and Ahmed al-Omran; February 15, 2007 (available at <http://www.bitterlemons-international.org/previous.php?opt=1&id=168>)

<sup>5</sup> Haykal on *Kawalis*, Al Jazeera, October 6, 2005. Other prominent discussions of blogs in the Arab mainstream media include the multi-part series written by Jihad Al Khazen in *Al Hayat*, June 15-22, 2005; Amina Khayri, "Egypt's bloggers," *Al Hayat*, October 18, 2004; and *Asharq Alawsat*, "The experience of Arab bloggers," January 25, 2006.

Ultimately, blogs are a technology which requires political actors and opportunities to become relevant. Rather than focus on whether blogs alone can deliver democracy or a political revolution, analysts should explore the variety of ways in which blogs might transform the dynamics of Arab public opinion and political activism. Even if expectations that a few courageous blogs could shatter the wall of fear sustaining brittle Arab states have been overblown, blogs could nevertheless allow ordinary Arabs to re-engage with politics, hone their analytical and argumentative skills, and escape the state-driven red lines which even the most independent of Arab media are forced to acknowledge. Blogs allow for “a widely dispersed set of interlinked arguments about politics that responds with extraordinary rapidity to new events.”<sup>6</sup> National blogospheres can create a space in which citizens are able to engage in sustained, focused political argument, and perhaps even hold national leaders to account in ways not managed by existing media. The ability of blogs to expose a Kuwaiti parliamentary candidate's vote buying, or to publicize the mistreatment of ordinary Egyptians in local police stations, could be only the cutting edge of new ways of enhancing political accountability and transparency. The dialogues and interactions on blogs, finally, may contribute to the rebuilding of transnational Arab identity by creating “warm” relationships among otherwise distant Arab youth. These blogs are chipping away at the encrusted structures of the Arab punditocracy, bringing in new voices which previously had no outlet, and challenging the norms and expectations governing Arab public political discourse. In short, even if Arab political blogs are unlikely to lead a revolution, they hold out the

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<sup>6</sup> Henry Farrell, “Bloggers and Parties: Can the netroots reshape American democracy?” *Boston Review* 31, no.5 (2006); Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2006).

prospect of a new kind of Arab public sphere which could reshape the texture of politics in the decades to come.<sup>7</sup>

### How Many Bloggers, and What do They Do?

Blogs remain a very small phenomenon in the Arab world, although one which has grown steadily. Internet penetration in the Arab world remains comparatively low (4 per cent by some measures presented on [www.internetworldstats.com/](http://www.internetworldstats.com/)) and concentrated in urban areas. 2006 Nielsen data suggests there are about 19 million Arab Internet users, making up about 10 per cent of the population. This represents almost a 500 per cent increase over six years ago, however, and Internet access seems nearly universal among politically mobilized youth in some Arab countries.<sup>8</sup> Arabic does not even rate as a top-ten blogging language in the latest Technorati rankings, where it makes up less than 1 per cent of the blogosphere; this does not capture English-language Arab blogs, however.<sup>9</sup> The most reasonable estimate of the number of Arab political blogs circa 2006 would be a few thousand, out of the commonly cited figure of 25,000 total blogs.<sup>10</sup> Issam Bayazidi, founder of the Jordan Planet aggregator, estimates the number of blogs last

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<sup>7</sup> For an overview of the evolution of the Arab public sphere, see Marc Lynch, *Voices of the New Arab Public: Iraq, Al-Jazeera, and Middle East Politics Today* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Jon Anderson and Dale Eickelman, eds., *New Media in a Changing Middle East* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm>; other surveys show closer to 26 million (<http://www.ameinfo.com/96643.html>)

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.technorati.com/weblog/2006/05/100.html>

<sup>10</sup> for blogs in Arabic, see <http://Arabblogcount.blogspot.com> and Iraq Blog Count: <http://www.iraqblogcount.blogspot.com/>

year at about 7,000,<sup>11</sup> while the popular host Jeeran claims to host 20,000 blogs, but does not distinguish between political and non-political blogs. Another popular host Maktoob estimates there are 4360 "political and news" blogs across the region. National aggregators in Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia each include about 300 active blogs, while Egypt may now boast over a thousand. Whatever the exact numbers, the relatively small number of readers and participants might suggest a built-in ceiling for the political impact of Arab blogs.

However, volume might not be necessary for political influence. Since much of the new energy in Arab politics comes from relatively small groups of activists, a technology which empowers their efforts could have a disproportionate impact even if it does not reach a mass base. A large portion of the readers of Arab blogs are political activists, journalists, and other politically influential elites (as well as foreign scholars and governments trying to gauge Arab public opinion), a high quality audience even if a relatively small one.<sup>12</sup> Newspapers such as *Al Masry Al Youm* and *Al Dustour* in Egypt now routinely cite blogs as sources for their stories, offering another indirect route for political impact. In such a political environment, even a handful of creative, engaged, and effective political bloggers can make a dramatic difference. If blogs cannot constitute a genuine public sphere without reaching a mass audience, they still might form a counter-public, an incubator of new ideas and new identities which evolves alongside and slowly reshapes the mainstream public from below.

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<sup>11</sup> Natasha Tynes, "Arab Blogging", G21 Mideast [www.g21.net/midE20.htm](http://www.g21.net/midE20.htm). "Gulf Bloggers: a new breed of Arab activists," Agence France Press, June 14, 2006

<sup>12</sup> Farrell, "Bloggers and parties."

The political outlook of Arab bloggers is shaped by the demographics of Internet users in the Arab world. Many in the first wave of Arab bloggers have tended to be young, technologically-oriented, and politically unengaged. As Haitham Sabbah points out, “whereas in the USA... many bloggers are long established journalists, commentators, and political troublemakers, such personalities in the Arab world do not yet generally have blogs.”<sup>13</sup> The Arab blogosphere still lacks a critical mass of policy bloggers—an elite corps of highly educated, informed bloggers who devote their time to advocacy on a single policy issue within their realm of expertise. This has begun to change, however. In Jordan, for instance, the first wave of young, tech-focused youth has already been supplemented by blogs maintained by Batir Wardum (a liberal columnist for the newspaper *Al Dustour*), Yasir Abu Hilala (Al Jazeera’s Amman correspondent and columnist for *Al Ghad*), Ziyad Abu Ghuneima (an Islamist former MP), and Hilmi Asmar (a columnist and former editor of the Muslim Brotherhood weekly newspaper *Al Sabil*).<sup>14</sup> As blogs come to be seen as politically relevant and respectable, more established figures are likely to embrace the form. At another end of the spectrum, Libya’s eccentric President Moammar Qaddafi supposedly began his own blog.<sup>15</sup>

Observers clearly need to be very wary of drawing inferences about public opinion from blogs. Some of the most prominent English-language bloggers are, for all

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<sup>13</sup> <http://sabbah.biz/mt/archives/2005/10/06/blogging-in-the-arab-world/>

<sup>14</sup> All blogs can be found at <http://jordanplanet.net>

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.algathafi.org/en/index\\_en.htm](http://www.algathafi.org/en/index_en.htm)

their other virtues, highly unrepresentative of public opinion in their countries. Their divergence from mainstream opinion often makes them interesting to read, but as dissidents rather than as barometers of local opinion.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, their novelty may be precisely the reason why they receive greater media attention. Someone who relied on the main Egyptian English-language blogs for information about Egyptian politics would likely have been shocked at the outcome of its parliamentary elections, while someone who relied on some of the more prominent English-language Iraqi blogs would have a very unbalanced sense of Iraqi politics. The Egyptian blogger Sandmonkey points to an anti-terror demonstration organized by a few bloggers as an example of the potential for blog influence because it “garnered headlines everywhere and it showed that there are Egyptians that oppose terrorism.”<sup>17</sup> But in fact the rally was quite small and said less about Egyptian public opinion than about the ability of these English-language bloggers to gain favorable coverage in like-minded blogs and media in the West (a form of power, to be sure). While blogs clearly do not represent wider public opinion, they still do offer the interpretations of potentially insightful individuals and, collectively, can at least offer insights into the views of young, educated, well-off Arabs.

Blogs are only one small part of the emerging Arab internet. Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, and most Arab newspapers have well-established presences on the web. Jihadi forums, in addition to discussion boards about topics ranging from sports, music and reality TV to sexuality, attract a lot of users, and allow for similar kinds of community

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<sup>16</sup> I thank Ammar Abdulhamid (<http://amarji.blogspot.com/>) for this defense of the virtues of unrepresentative blogs.

<sup>17</sup> As quoted by Tynes, “Arab blogging”

building, interaction, and building of "warm" relationships across vast divides. Helmi Noman studied 338 online Arabic-language forums between July and September 2005.<sup>18</sup> He found Islamic-themed forums to be the most common (27 per cent), with jihadi forums representing a small but highly active sub-set. Only 5 per cent were devoted to politics and current affairs, less than the proportion devoted to a range of other non-political categories including sports, entertainment, the stock market, and computers (Noman found that 42 per cent of all the Yahoo Groups he surveyed focused on sex.) Perhaps these non-political uses of the internet will serve as a bridge to more political engagements. The Syrian dissident/blogger Ammar Abdulhamid argues that young Arabs who use social networking sites as a "means for self-expression" are "more likely... to develop a greater affinity and respect for the more socially and politically relevant blogs."<sup>19</sup> Not only do online forums and networks involve kinds of participation which articulate well with the process of accountable politics—criticism, negotiation, argument—they can also lead users to strictly political blogs.

The question of anonymity has been divisive in discussions of the Arab blogosphere. In January 2006, Jihad Al Khazen sparked a minor blogging tempest by attacking the Saudi "Religious Policeman" blogger for writing controversial opinions under a pseudonym.<sup>20</sup> Many of the more politically engaged bloggers have chosen not to

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<sup>18</sup> [http://www.helmionline.com/internet/2005/10/web\\_content.htm](http://www.helmionline.com/internet/2005/10/web_content.htm) Also see Ethan Zuckerman's blog, April 5, 2006, <http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/?p=470>

<sup>19</sup> On the Amarji blog, July 27, 2006, <http://amarji.blogspot.com/2006/07/blogging-and-future-of-democracy-in.html>

<sup>20</sup> *Al Hayat*, January 5, 2006; available at <http://www.daralhayat.com/opinion/editorials/01-2006/Item-20060104-96ceaf15-c0a8-10ed-0025-b64d4bbd291e/story.html>

use pseudonyms, on the assumption that they would be unlikely to remain unknown to state security services anyway.<sup>21</sup> But political blogging can be deeply risky in the Middle East. As Wael Abbas puts it, “becoming a blogger can be a life-changing decision attracting phone taps, official harassment or even arrest.”<sup>22</sup> The arrest and torture of some Egyptian bloggers sent a chilling message throughout the Arab blogosphere, particularly the recent sentencing of anti-Islamist blogger Abd al-Kareem Nabil Suleiman to four years in prison for views expressed on his blog.<sup>23</sup> And while Alaa Abd El Fattah received considerable international attention and support after his arrest during the Egyptian judge’s crisis of 2005 (including a statement of support from the United States government and Human Rights Watch), this did not keep him out of jail, and other less well-known bloggers languished in prison without a spotlight. Bahraini bloggers have also faced interrogations and intimidation from security services, with several spending weeks in jail for online remarks critical of the regime.<sup>24</sup> The risks of blogging have been felt across the Arab world: Tunisian, Libyan, and Syrian bloggers in particular have faced serious consequences for online speech, which has had a predictably chilling effect.

Some blog enthusiasts seem to explicitly or implicitly expect that blogs will primarily empower pro-American voices. Spirit of America, a conservative American NGO, developed an Arabic-language blog platform which “gives voices to those working for freedom and democracy in the Arab world... and enables them to easily connect and

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<sup>21</sup> Interview, Alaa Abd El Fattah, January 14, 2007, Cairo

<sup>22</sup> Wael Abbas, DPA, “Blogging in the Middle East is a tough choice”

[http://rawstory.com/news/2006/Blogging\\_in\\_the\\_Middle\\_East\\_is\\_a\\_tough\\_choice\\_09142006.html](http://rawstory.com/news/2006/Blogging_in_the_Middle_East_is_a_tough_choice_09142006.html)

<sup>23</sup> See “Free Kareem” blog at <http://www.freekareem.org>

<sup>24</sup> See the “Free Ali” blog: <http://freeali.blogspot.com/>

share ideas with their peers."<sup>25</sup> But there is no reason to assume that blogs will favor any particular political agenda. In the United States, both conservative and liberal activists have found innovative ways to harness blogs for their political ends. In the Arab world, Islamist movements have long been early and effective adopters of new media technologies, from satellite television to online forums.<sup>26</sup> In February 2007, for instance, a number of Egyptian Muslim Brothers began blogging, with an online campaign for the liberty of arrested Brotherhood leaders and students directly imitating the “Free Alaa” and “Free Kareem” campaigns—including custom-made banners, link-exchanges, online petitions, personal testimonies, high resolution photos of protests, and embedded videos.<sup>27</sup> While relatively Westernized youth adopted blogging first, the political characteristics of the blogosphere will likely shift as the technology spreads more widely. Blogs may be “opposition in a new voice,” as they were termed in a recent Al Jazeera documentary,<sup>28</sup> but a variety of political movements can access the same tools.

### **Modes of Blogging: Activists, Bridges, and Public Spheres**

Arab political bloggers engage in three principle types of activity: activism, bridge-blogging, and public sphere engagement. *Activists* are directly involved in

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<sup>25</sup> [http://www.spiritofamerica.net/cgi-bin/soa/project.pl?rm=view\\_project&request\\_id=78](http://www.spiritofamerica.net/cgi-bin/soa/project.pl?rm=view_project&request_id=78)

<sup>26</sup> See Marc Lynch, “Al Qaeda’s Media Strategies,” *The National Interest* 81 (Spring 2006).

<sup>27</sup> Marc Lynch, “Brotherhood of the Blog,” *The Guardian* (Comment is Free), March 5, 2007, at

[http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/marc\\_lynch/2007/03/brotherhood\\_of\\_the\\_blog.html](http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/marc_lynch/2007/03/brotherhood_of_the_blog.html)

<sup>28</sup> Documentary hosted by Ahmed Zayn, Al Jazeera May 26, 2006.

political movements, using blogs to coordinate political action, spread information, and magnify the impact of contentious politics. *Bridgebloggers* primarily address Western audiences, usually writing in English with the intention of explaining their societies. Finally, *public-sphere bloggers* tend to not be directly involved in a political movement, but are deeply engaged with public arguments about domestic (and often Arab or Islamic) politics. These categories are not mutually exclusive, of course, and many individuals move fluidly across boundaries: the Egyptian Baheyya is primarily a public sphere blogger, engaging in sophisticated and trenchant analysis rather than direct political organization, but her writings helped the Kefaya movement and the Egyptian judges protest reach wide audiences abroad (bridge-blogging) and were translated into Arabic and used by activists. But distinguishing these three modes of action can help to make sense of the different ways in which Arab bloggers might influence politics in the region.

### *Activists*

Activist bloggers are directly involved in politics, using their blogs toward political organization and campaigns. While this could have a transnational focus (organizing a boycott of Danish products, for instance), more often these activist blogs focus on domestic politics within their own country. In Egypt, Bahrain, and Kuwait, for example, bloggers have played a key role in mobilizing contentious politics. Other Arab blogospheres, such as in Jordan and Saudi Arabia, remain more on the political sidelines,

although they have increasingly taken note of the exploits of their activist peers.<sup>29</sup> The core distinction is not whether bloggers *talk* about politics, it is whether they are actively engaged in politics. It is unclear whether the emergence of activist blogging is best explained by something unique about particular bloggers or about the political context more widely. Given the very small numbers of people involved, the inventiveness or courage of only a few individuals could make the difference. Still, if there were no political openings to exploit, it is unlikely that these individuals would have had the opportunity for their innovative political blogging.

Take Egypt, the most well-documented case of a close, organic relationship between blogging and a contentious political movement (see also Rania Al Malky's article in this issue).<sup>30</sup> Kefaya began as a petition of some 300 intellectuals in the summer of 2004, and developed an Internet presence with a popular Web site in the fall of 2004. Their first big protest in December 2004 attracted considerable media attention. Blogs began to play a key role over the course of 2005. By 2005 there were about 1500 Egyptian bloggers, more than half in Arabic, almost all of which are in the aggregator maintained by Alaa Abd El Fattah and his wife Manal.<sup>31</sup> Those blogs provided coverage and attention at times when the mass media paid little attention, and contributed both to

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<sup>29</sup> "Bloggers arousing a clamor," post on Living in KSA blog, May 8, 2006, [http://abu-yousef.blogspot.com/2006/05/blog-post\\_08.html](http://abu-yousef.blogspot.com/2006/05/blog-post_08.html); "The rise of political blogs," post on Saudi Jeans, July 22, 2006, <http://saudijeans.blogspot.com/2006/07/rise-of-political-blogs.html>

<sup>30</sup> Charles Levison, "Egypt's growing blogger community pushes the limits of dissent," Christian Science Monitor, August 24, 2005; interviews with Kefaya coordinator George Ishaq and several Kefaya members, January 2007.

<sup>31</sup> Alaa Abd El Fattah (<http://manalaa.net/>) interview, and presentation blogged by Ethan Zuckerman, September 16 2006 <http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/?p=987>.

publicity and to organization. The May 2005 protest was a crucial moment for blogger coverage of Egyptian activism. As events unfolded, bloggers claimed to be the only source reporting on a protest in which fewer than 100 activists were met by several thousand hired thugs and riot police who roughed up peaceful protesters including women. According to Ethan Zuckerman, “Bloggers broke the story four days before the Egyptian press took it on. Reuters had some photos of the incident, but not a full story, and Al Jazeera wasn’t present, so blogger accounts were critical to spreading information.”<sup>32</sup> As the Kefaya movement developed, bloggers worked with protest organizers to ensure that photographs and narratives of the protests were quickly disseminated online—offering a valuable resource to journalists, international NGOs and to Egyptian citizens alike.<sup>33</sup> For all the innovative activism of Kefaya and associated bloggers, however, the movement would have achieved little political impact without the temporary opening created by a constitutional referendum, presidential elections, and parliamentary elections—along with the appearance of several new like-minded independent newspapers and the increased Western scrutiny of Egyptian democracy due to the Bush administration’s reform rhetoric. The recent Muslim Brotherhood blogging campaign noted above, where blogs such as “Ana Ikhwan” and “Ensaar” resemble more the efforts of Wael Abbas’s Al-Wa’i Al-Masry and Manalaa.net than it does typical Brotherhood activism, suggests how easily the tools of Internet campaigning can be

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid

<sup>33</sup> For example, see Al Arabiya, August 8, 2006; <http://www.alarabiya.net/Articlep.aspx?P=26423>

adapted by different kinds of political movements.<sup>34</sup>

In Bahrain, bloggers and online forums played a direct role in a human-rights campaign which infuriated the regime and generated great public controversy (see Luke Schleusener's article in this issue).<sup>35</sup> In contrast to Egypt, where bloggers entered into a crowded if sclerotic political scene, Bahraini bloggers operated on a smaller scale. But this relative political vacuum also presented an opportunity for the young bloggers. By 2005, some 60 Bahraini blogs were energetically focusing on local politics in both English and Arabic, many under pseudonyms.<sup>36</sup> Those bloggers helped to organize and publicize a number of protests over issues such as the arrest of Abdulhadi Al Khawaja of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (in December 2004) and constitutional reforms. In response, the Bahraini authorities arrested some of the most active bloggers, such as Ali Abdulemam, and demanded that Internet sites register with the authorities in an attempt to break down the anonymity protecting some of the most outspoken voices. More recently, Bahraini bloggers have been intensely following "Bandar Gate", a scandal driven by revelations of regime plans to fix the 2006 parliamentary elections, and produced a map of the country using Google Earth revealing vast appropriations for the

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<sup>34</sup> Lynch, "Brotherhood of the Blog." Blogs referenced: Al-Wa'i al-Masry at <http://misrdigital.net>; Manalaa.net; <http://anaikhwan.blogspot.com>; <http://ensaa.blogspot.com>

<sup>35</sup> Toby Jones, "Bahrain: It must be election season," Qahwa Sada, October 12, 2006 ([http://abuaardvark.typepad.com/qahwa\\_sada/2006/10/bahrain\\_must\\_be.html](http://abuaardvark.typepad.com/qahwa_sada/2006/10/bahrain_must_be.html)) <http://chanad.weblogs.us/?cat=11>

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.globalvoicesonline.org/2005/12/26/bahrains-roller-coaster-week-in-review/>

royal family- instances of online activism which led the Bahraini government to briefly ban the Mahmood's Den blog within the country.<sup>37</sup>

Kuwaiti bloggers took advantage of several windows of opportunity over the course of 2006. Kuwaiti blogs, which had gained an audience with their coverage of the succession crisis following the death of the Emir in January 2006, picked up a campaign to reduce the number of electoral districts from 25 to 5 in order to cut back on notoriously corrupt electoral practices. When the Emir called early Parliamentary elections, blogs jumped into the fray with a vengeance. As Mary Ann Tetrault describes it,

“Voters could read some of the more sensational blog postings in daily newspapers. The Orange Movement leadership maintains a blog originating in the United States, managed jointly by overseas Kuwaiti students and one of the Orange organizers.... During the campaign, it brought electoral corruption into the public eye thanks to a posting by a woman who recounted how two men in Rula Dashti’s district had attempted to buy her vote with the promise of a Chanel handbag. Although she did not mention the candidate’s name, it soon became public knowledge that she was speaking of Jamal Al ‘Umar.”<sup>38</sup>

While ‘Umar nevertheless won a seat, reformist figures supported by these bloggers did remarkably well in the elections, even if ultimate power remained in the hands of the Sabah family. The Kuwaiti case is particularly interesting since prior to 2006, most observers had seen the Kuwaiti blogosphere as relatively disengaged from politics and marginal to the public realm.

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<sup>37</sup> See roundup by Ethan Zuckerman, <http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/?p=1085>;

<sup>38</sup> Mary Ann Tétrault, “Kuwait’s Annus Mirabilis” September 7, 2006  
<http://www.merip.org/mero/mero090706.html>

Looking at these three cases reveals some instructive parallels, which may also explain why they differ from other countries which lack such activist blogging. In all three cases activist bloggers took advantage of a political opening by turning it into something more than ruling elites had intended: Kefaya turned what could have been ritual, sham elections into a tense drama; the Bahraini bloggers turned a routinely repressive shutdown of a human-rights organization into a political cause; and Kuwaiti bloggers helped push for an early election in which they could then engage. It only took a few activists to tip the balance from a relatively passive and marginal blogosphere into much more active political engagement. Other countries which have many bloggers but few activists may simply lack the necessary political openings: Jordan lacks any significant political parties other than the Islamic Action Front and has been steadily de-liberalizing over recent years; Tunisian bloggers have not been able to escape the intensely repressive state policing of the media; Saudi bloggers face the same extreme censorship and personal fear which dominates offline Saudi public life. But should political openings appear—parliamentary elections in Jordan scheduled for later this year for instance—they could create an opportunity for activist blogging.

### *Bridgebloggers*

Most Western attention to Arab blogging has focused on what Ethan Zuckerman has termed “bridge-bloggers”: Arabs writing in English as interpreters of their communities,

less engaged in local politics than in building bridges to Western audiences.<sup>39</sup> The Iraqi blogger Salam Pax was one of the first major “bridge-bloggers” because of the attention he received in the English language blogosphere.<sup>40</sup> The Bahraini blogger Mahmood Al Yousif presents the quintessential explanation of bridge-blogging:

"Now I try to dispel the image that Muslims and Arabs suffer from - mostly by our own doing I have to say - in the rest of the world. I am no missionary and don't want to be. I run several Internet websites that are geared to do just that, create a better understanding that we're not all nuts hell-bent on world destruction."<sup>41</sup>

Zuckerman argues that these bridge-bloggers are a small and shrinking proportion of the international blogosphere, but are actually increasingly important in order to avoid fragmentation into hermetically sealed language enclaves. Haitham Sabbah suggests that such Arab blogs can challenge the biases of the Western media, “open new channels of discussion”, and “get attention and support from international media as well as NGOs for cases that one day were impossible to cross the borders”.<sup>42</sup>

These bridge-bloggers, writing in English with an eye on Western discourse, often receive disproportionate attention from Western journalists.<sup>43</sup> As bridge-bloggers focus on addressing foreign audiences, they often stand aloof from their own national politics.

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<sup>39</sup> Ethan Zuckerman, “Meet the Bridgebloggers”, draft presented to “The Power and Political Science of Blogs” conference, University of Chicago, September 16-17, 2005.

<sup>40</sup> [http://dear\\_raed.blogspot.com/](http://dear_raed.blogspot.com/)

<sup>41</sup> [http://mahmood.tv/?page\\_id=2](http://mahmood.tv/?page_id=2)

<sup>42</sup> <http://sabbah.biz/mt/archives/2005/10/06/blogging-in-the-arab-world/>

<sup>43</sup> Gal Beckerman, “The New Arab Conversation,” Columbia Journalism Review (January/February 2007), available at <http://www.cjr.org/issues/2007/1/Beckerman.asp>.

Such bridge-blogging depends heavily on links from American "hub blogs", widely-trafficked blogs which serve as focal points for like-minded blogospheres. Given the realities of the American blogosphere, this translates into a partisan, politicized kind of gate-keeping, in which partisan hub-bloggers lavish attention and hits on Arab blogs which tell them what their own readers wanted to hear. Early in the Iraq War for example, conservative hub-bloggers promoted the pro-American Iraq the Model (and later hired its proprietors Omar and Mohammed Fadil as the regional editors for the conservative blog consortium Pajamas Media), while liberal bloggers lavished attention on the more critical Riverbend.<sup>44</sup> The temptations for would-be bridge-bloggers to play to a partisan audience threatened to transform them from bridges into mirrors.

There are some exceptions. Both right and left-wing American blogs could rally around a democracy activist like Alaa Abd El Fattah, for instance.<sup>45</sup> Global Voices Online offers one way around these gate-keeper hubs by delegating regional editors fluent in the local language to sift through national blogospheres in order to present snapshots of their internal dialogues.<sup>46</sup> While this simply replaces one gate-keeper with another, it at least replaces the "cherry-picking" of partisan Western hub-blogs with the judgment of someone inside the debates. Westernized bloggers do have a comparative advantage in the bridge-blogging arena: an Islamist blogger writing in Arabic is simply

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<sup>44</sup> <http://iraqthemodel.blogspot.com/> , <http://www.pajamasmedia.com> and <http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com/>

<sup>45</sup> Lauren Frayer, "Even from prison, Egyptian democracy activist works the blogosphere," Associated Press, May 28, 2006

<sup>46</sup> <http://www.globalvoicesonline.org/>

less likely to strike the same chord in the U.S. as an anti-Islamist blogger writing in English.

### *Public Sphere Bloggers*

“Public-sphere” blogs are deeply engaged in arguments about domestic politics, but not in organized activism. While many assume that blogs must be in Arabic to constitute a genuine public sphere, many of the best of them are in fact in English. Baheyya, the pseudonymous blog of an Egyptian woman, offers a premiere example. With biting wit and an intimate knowledge of the contentious politics about which she wrote, Baheyya quickly became a lodestone not only for Western readers but for Egyptians themselves; no less an authority than Mohammed Hasanayn Haykal dubbed Baheyya “the best source of political analysis on Egypt”. Baheyya and Issandr El Amrani’s Arabist Network served as vital conduits of information about Egyptian activism for Western analysts.<sup>47</sup> Chanad Bahraini and Mahmood's Den covered human-rights protests in Bahrain in 2005 but did not organize them, and while they brought those movements to Western attention, the blogs were fundamentally oriented towards influencing domestic Bahraini political arguments.<sup>48</sup> Bloggers such as Khalaf , Batir Wardum, and Nasseem Tarawneh in Jordan remain on the political sidelines, but offer some of the sharpest and most direct public argument anywhere about Jordanian

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<sup>47</sup> The Arabist Network (<http://arabist.net>) featured posts by a number of Cairo-based English-language journalists.

<sup>48</sup> <http://chanad.weblogs.us/?cat=11> and <http://mahmood.tv>

politics.<sup>49</sup> Some Tunisian bloggers argue that even without the kind of activism seen in Egypt, blogging in Tunisia is “an alternative to the national press ... filling the vacuum that the mainstream media have created.”<sup>50</sup> Even self-declared dissidents such as the Syrian Ammar Abdulhamid are more engaged in public-sphere activity than actual political organization given Syrian realities.<sup>51</sup>

Whether or not blogs can constitute a public sphere has been a matter of great debate in recent years.<sup>52</sup> Habermas himself has speculated that blogs can only constitute a public sphere when they “link up” to the mass media. Until this happens, goes the argument, blogs will remain a phenomenon on the margins of the public sphere, with satellite television stations and national newspapers remaining far more important to mass politics. Even a relatively free sub-public in which political arguments and ideas are publicly exchanged is no small thing in the Arab political context. But in fact linkages between blogs and mass media are becoming increasingly common. Egyptian newspapers such as *Al Masry Al Youm* and *Al Dustour* have published excerpts from blogs and routinely cite them in their stories. Al-Jazeera has recently launched ‘al-Jazeera Talk,’ an online portal which offers posts by its correspondents, forums, and a link to the Arabic blog aggregator Dwenn.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Wardum at <http://batir.jeeran.com/>; Khalaf at <http://ajloun.blogspot.com>; Tarawanah at <http://www.black-iris.com/>

<sup>50</sup> <http://www.globalvoicesonline.org/2006/10/05/blogging-tunisia-whisper/>

<sup>51</sup> <http://amarji.blogspot.com>

<sup>52</sup> Jodi Dean, “Why the Net is not a Public Sphere,” *Constellations* 10, no.1 (2003); James Bohman, “Expanding Dialogue: the internet, the public sphere, and prospects for transnational democracy,” *Sociological Review* 2004

<sup>53</sup> Al-Jazeera Talk is at <http://www.aljazeerataalk.net/portal/>, and Dwenn at <http://www.dwenn.com/>

This new blog-based public sphere challenges the “punditocracy” directly, as entrenched elites lose some of their power to dictate the terms of debate and frames of reference. The punditocracy still has the real advantages of access to privileged positions in the mass media, but can no longer bound or seal off public discourse. Blogs have offered a similar—if less full-blown—challenge to the encrusted, rigid structures of the Arab punditocracy. Today’s public-sphere bloggers offer the tip of an iceberg of politically savvy, engaged citizens determined to argue in public about the things which matter to them. Blogs tap into the same deep appeal captured by Al Jazeera, which thrived by embracing more participatory forms such as unscreened call-in shows, live talk shows, online polls. But even Al Jazeera could only expand the range of existing voices rather than enable a new generation of political voices.

Whether these blogs can live up to Habermasian ideals of rational-critical discourse is beside the point. The key contribution of Arab public-sphere bloggers is as the leading edge of a new engagement with politics by Arab citizens. That these public debates are still limited to very small numbers, or that many blog under pseudonyms, is hardly a major problem: how many people actually attended literary salons in Habermas’s idealized eighteenth century (few), and how many important political tracts were published under pseudonyms (many)? What matters is the arguments themselves, and the political identities, commitments, and ideas they generate. Blogs give young

Arabs frustrated with the status quo an outlet to “voice their concerns and ideas in spaces where they will be taken seriously and where results are possible.”<sup>54</sup>

### **The Politics of Blog Communities**

Will blogs create a single Arab public sphere or multiple national blogospheres? Most Arab blogospheres have developed in a national direction, despite the inherently boundary crossing nature of the Internet. Currently there is less of an ‘Arab blogosphere’ than a series of national blogospheres loosely linked at key nodes in each. Blogs have been harnessed to concrete political movements in some Arab countries (such as Egypt, Bahrain, and Kuwait), but remain politically marginal and disconnected in others. Most aggregators (such as Saudi Blogs, Jordan Planet, Kuwait’s Safat, and Bahrain Blogs) adopt the national mode, as does Global Voices Online. Some newer aggregators, like iToot (“we find the best and freshest voices from across Arabia and around the world”) and Dwenn (“the forum of Arab bloggers”) try to break this down and select blogs from around the Arab world.<sup>55</sup>

Aggregators face a core problem, however: either they include everything, which becomes overwhelming; or they select what to include, which builds new resentments among those excluded. JordanPlanet.net, one of the early innovators in Arab blog

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<sup>54</sup> John Guidry and Mark Sawyer, “Contentious pluralism: The public sphere and democracy,” *Perspectives on Politics* 1, no.2 (June 2003), pp.273-289.

<sup>55</sup> <http://itoot.net> , <http://dwwen.com>

aggregation, shut down over disenchantment with its growing roster, while JordanBlogs.net experienced a nasty spat in February 2007 over the deletion of several controversial bloggers. The popular iToot aggregator has generated complaints from many bloggers not selected by its administrators, as well as from those who felt that it was biased towards liberal voices writing in Egypt. The Dwenn aggregator has partnered with Al Jazeera to offer a larger assortment of blogs, primarily in Arabic. Administrators of these aggregators also worry about their own liability for republishing material which comes under attack, making some of them rather sensitive about aggressive political blogging.<sup>56</sup>

The national focus of these blogospheres could potentially fill what is currently the greatest hole in the Arab media: free, critical domestic media. Such a domestic focus could revitalize domestic public spheres. At the same time, the national focus can be vulnerable to nationalist mobilization and patriotic sentiment. Terrorist attacks against Jordan have tended to shut down contentious blog debates: after the November 2005 hotel bombings in Amman, bloggers provided emotional on-the-scene reporting but politically tended to rally around the national flag. Many Jordanian bloggers are quicker to defend the Kingdom from foreign critics than to engage in domestic political disputes.<sup>57</sup> Still, the importance of domestically-engaged blogging can be seen in one Tunisian blogger's lament:

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<sup>56</sup> Personal interview with Ahmed Humeid, Doha, February 19, 2007.

<sup>57</sup> <http://www.globalvoicesonline.org/2006/03/06/from-the-jordanian-blogsphere-19/>; for another example, see <http://ajloun.blogspot.com/2006/10/jordans-image.html>

a “cursory look at the Tunisian blogosphere ... will reveal that it hardly ever deals with topics pertaining to national politics. Those bloggers who do talk about political issues will most probably analyze what is happening in the international arena without ever mentioning what goes on in their own country.... This apathy vis-à-vis Tunisian politics is mostly explained by a fear of the regime. This regime has shown on numerous occasions that it would brook no dissent and tolerate no opposition to its policies. A number of Internet users that were deemed subversive by the government were put in jail for expressing their opinions and this has unfortunately acted as an enormous deterrent... Besides, self-censorship is rife in Tunisia.”<sup>58</sup>

Some worry that a domestically-focused blogosphere is potentially limiting in terms of offering a new kind of public space for working out the big pan-Arab issues of the day, with Palestine or Iraq suffering when domestic corruption or elections take pride of place. But this misses the value of domestically-engaged blogging in a climate where most national media lag behind the great steps taken by the pan-Arab satellite television stations. Arab bloggers writing about Palestine or Lebanon or the Danish cartoons may reflect widespread attitudes about those issues, but do not generally add a tremendous amount to the discussion about those grand, distant affairs. Engaged bloggers exposing torture or electoral machinations, on the other hand, add something vitally new.

Defining the boundaries of an identity is an important element of politics,<sup>59</sup> and national blogospheres have witnessed some nasty spats over their identity.<sup>60</sup> Perhaps the

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<sup>58</sup> <http://www.globalvoicesonline.org/2006/10/05/blogging-tunisia-whisper/>

<sup>59</sup> This includes intriguing questions about what makes a blog “Arab”: itoot, for instance, includes my Abu Aardvark blog because I write about Arab issues, even though I am not Arab and don’t live in an Arab country

most vivid of the Arab-blogsphere wars was the OCSAB controversy in Saudi Arabia. The clash started in spring 2006 when law student Mohamed Al Masa'ed launched an aggregator called OCSAB ("Official Community of Saudi Arabian Bloggers") as an alternative to Ahmed Al-Omran's Saudi Blogs.<sup>61</sup> Saudi Blogs had built a reputation as a home for entertaining bloggers who were often liberal and writing in English. OCSAB guidelines, by contrast, demanded member blogs "must not insult Islam at any level" or make references to "liberalism and secularism," in addition to requiring that blogs "must be in Arabic, except for blogs that call to Islam." Its claim to be the "official" community particularly rankled other bloggers. More recently, the OCSAB group proposed organizing regular "meet-ups", which could be taken as an act of intimidation in the Saudi context, where many bloggers remain anonymous out of fear of political repression.<sup>62</sup> The Egyptian blogger Sandmonkey responded by recounting a similar skirmish in Egypt, where (as he put it) a new generation of more Islamist bloggers started up with their own rules trashing the "Old Guard".<sup>63</sup>

### The Future of Blog Power

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<sup>60</sup> Diana Mukalled, "Arab bloggers ... groups and not individuals," *Asharq Alawsat*, February 5, 2006

<sup>61</sup> <http://www.ocsab.com/> and [www.saudiblogs.org](http://www.saudiblogs.org). For details of this controversy, see Saudi Jeans blog, <http://saudijeans.blogspot.com/2006/04/ocsab-not-my-thing.html>

<sup>62</sup> As reported on the Web edition of Al Arabiya, August 2006, <http://www.alarabiya.net/Articlep.aspx?P=26700>

<sup>63</sup> <http://www.sandmonkey.org/2006/04/06/the-arab-blogistan/>

The analysis presented in this paper is intended to help tease out how Arab blogs might—or might not—exercise political influence. Some of the most obvious routes of influence in American politics do not apply: Arab blogs do not raise money for candidates for office like Daily Kos, for instance, or have a serious impact on presidential elections. They have yet to claim scalps such as those of CBS news anchor Dan Rather or Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, whose careers were ended in part through the efforts of partisan bloggers. The language barrier between a largely English-language Internet infrastructure and Arabic-language users can make it difficult to obtain basic data about commonly used measures of Arab blog influence, such as hyperlinks, traffic, or rankings on Web monitors like Truthlaidbear or Technorati.

Despite all that, Arab political bloggers are likely to continue to evolve in all three modes described above. Activist bloggers will likely learn from the successful uses of the Internet in cases such as Egypt, Bahrain, and Kuwait. In each of those cases, it only took a few early innovators to trigger a cascade of activist blogging—which suggests that other Arab countries could be more ripe for such blog activism than they currently appear. I would expect to see more cases of blogs identifying and pursuing scandals which the state-dominated media chooses to ignore, as in the Kuwaiti vote-buying episode or Bahrain's Bandar Gate. Egyptian bloggers have recently begun posting disturbing clips of the torture and mistreatment of ordinary citizens at police stations—stories which have begun to be picked up by some of the more courageous local

newspapers.<sup>64</sup> Prominent dissidents might increasingly turn to blogs to circumvent the red lines which keep them—or their more controversial ideas—out of the official media.

Bridge-blogging (or its less lofty mirror-blogging variant) will most likely play an ever more important role in shaping how Western media cover the region as Western journalists increasingly seek out bloggers as interlocutors and draw on their reporting to frame their own stories. In an age of dwindling overseas media coverage, such English-language blogs can have an impact by serving as a kind of volunteer press service.

Women writing from conflict-torn countries such as Iraq (Riverbend) or Gaza (Mona El-Farra's From Gaza blog, and Al Jazeera journalist Laila El-Haddad's Raising Yusuf blog) powerfully and intimately convey the human challenges facing families in these war-torn countries.<sup>65</sup> During the Lebanon war, Lebanese bloggers provided snapshots of life which brought home the human impact of the war. Photos of human devastation in Lebanon by *As-Safir* editor Hanady Salman posted on Flickr accounts and discussed on blogs clearly reached a wide international audience.<sup>66</sup>

The greatest impact of blogs, however, will likely be in their contribution to revitalizing and transforming Arab public spheres. New forms of public argument and discourse, among a vastly expanded range of voices, will make it ever more difficult for narrow elites to monopolize the field of discourse. Arab mass media outlets will likely

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<sup>64</sup> Wael Abbas's MisrDigital blog has many of these (<http://misrdigital.blogspot.com>)

<sup>65</sup> For instance, see the roundup in the Independent, "The blogs of war", August 10, 2006. From Gaza at <http://fromgaza.blogspot.com>; Raising Yusuf at <http://a-mother-from-gaza.blogspot.com/>

<sup>66</sup> The Arabist Network's Flickr account of Salman's pictures can be found here: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/12011945@N00/>

look for ways to incorporate these new voices and platforms.<sup>67</sup> This should not be taken to mean that these new publics will necessarily be more pro-American or even more liberal: as a wider range of voices join blogospheres, they would likely reflect more accurately the general distribution of attitudes among at least the educated, elite Arabs who are likely to blog.

States, of course, will not take increased blog power lying down. Internet filtering is already common, though of dubious effectiveness, and a number of prominent bloggers have already struggled with their Web sites being blocked in their home country. As blogs gain political relevance, bloggers will attract the attention of the repressive state security services. Most bloggers already assume that state security monitors their blogs, and perhaps even actively infiltrates the blogosphere (either posing as bloggers or as commentors).<sup>68</sup> Some countries, such as Bahrain, have insisted (with only partial success) that bloggers register under their real names. Repression of high profile bloggers (such as Alaa) could reinforce self-censorship and lead others to avoid political commentary.<sup>69</sup> Regimes could manipulate the blogosphere by flooding it with pro-regime blogs or by seeding it with deliberately provocative blogs (insulting Islam, for instance, or provoking ethnic tensions) which could justify a crackdown. And most directly, the arrest of the

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<sup>67</sup> <http://www.aljazeeraatalk.net/> and <http://video.alarabiya.net/default.aspx>

<sup>68</sup> See the lengthy exchange over an article in the newspaper *Al Dustour* about mukhabarat penetration of blogs, August 11, 2006, at [http://manalaa.net/al\\_destour\\_asks\\_about\\_security\\_infiltrating](http://manalaa.net/al_destour_asks_about_security_infiltrating)

<sup>69</sup> Amina Khayri, "Egyptian Bloggers in the line of confrontation," *Al Hayat*, May 18, 2006; Lindsay Wise, "Why Egypt is cracking down on bloggers," *Time*, June 1, 2006

blogger Abd al-Karim Nabeel Sulayman and the pressures on Bahraini blogger Mahmoud al-Youssif show the heavy hand of the state in its bluntest form.<sup>70</sup>

More optimistically, Arab regimes could recognize the value of blogs in contributing to a more engaged public sphere and learn to tolerate online political criticism. Since blogs reach small audiences, they could be seen as an unusually safe way to allow publics to let off steam and to serve as “early warning” indicators of trouble. Since American observers pay so much attention to blogs, tolerating them may allow regimes to get away with far more significant repression of the mass media or of political activism. On balance, it seems likely that blogs will increase in political significance. Because the Internet is central to the kind of economic development desired by most Arab regimes, access to the Internet will only increase. The prospect that national media will dramatically improve in the near future, removing the need for these alternative sites of public discourse, seems slim. Whether through direct activism, bridge-blogging, or public sphere argument, the ability of blogs to frame stories and to funnel information into the public sphere will grow.

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<sup>70</sup> Abd al-Karim’s blog at <http://karam903.blogspot.com/>; Mahmoud al-Yousif’s at <http://mahmood.tv>. See <http://www.freekareem.org/> for articles and commentary about his case.

