ONLINE MEDIA AND THE ARABIC PUBLIC SPHERE: 
THE CASE OF THE AL-ARABIYA SITE

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ABSTRACT
The paper reports the perceptions of users in relation to their participation in one of the media sites in the Arab world and comments on the site’s ability to foster a public sphere for the Arabs. This site is the Al Arabiya site, which is the official website of the popular TV station the Al Arabiya and was selected because of its growing popularity among Arabs. The paper is the result of an empirical study that was conducted in 2007 and used a descriptive survey to collect the data. The study concludes that the feedback facility available on the site allowed Arabs to not only discuss and debate issues that concern them as a group but also made them capable of contributing to the media content and challenging the truth about what is reported.

KEYWORDS
The public sphere, freedom of expression, new media, the Arab world, the Al-Arabiya site.

1. INTRODUCTION

People turn to the internet for news and information for several reasons including, low cost, ease of use, and effortlessness. Additionally, most media sites nowadays are equipped with commentary facilities which allow the readers the opportunity to raise questions, obtain additional information, provide clarifications, express opinions and interact with other readers.

Governments in many of the Arab countries control the media and influence its content. The rankings of the Arab countries in the World Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders, 2008) are evident of this. Governments in the Arab world also exercise tight control over freedom of expression on their individuals in public. This makes internet sites among the few channels available to Arabs to voice their opinions.

These factors also and the fact that the anonymity that online media sites offer which enable readers to express their views without the fear of imprisonment or punishment make the internet even more attractive to Arabic readers and for this reason a growing number of Arabs has turned to the internet for news and information.

On the other hand, although the internet in the Arab world is heavily censored (Reporters Without Borders, 2008), what appears on it cannot be completely controlled by Arab governments and spaces like online forums, chat rooms and media websites have provided many opportunities for freedom of expression (Al-Saggaf, 2006).

While there are several good case studies of internet use in the Arab World, in sheer quantitative terms there is dearth of research on the use of the internet in the Arab world as a medium for discussing politics and expressing opinions particularly from the perspective of Arabic researchers. This paper takes a step in the direction of addressing this gap in the literature. The paper reports the perceptions of users in relation to their participation in one of the media sites in the Arab world and comments on the site’s ability to foster a public sphere for the Arabs.
2. AN OVERVIEW OF THE ONLINE PUBLIC SPHERE

Jürgen Habermas, who coined the term ‘public sphere’, defines it as "an entity that comes into being when private individuals assemble to form a public body. They then behave neither like business or professional people transacting private affairs, nor like members of a constitutional order subject to the legal constraints of a state bureaucracy" (Habermas 1974, p. 49, cited in Elvin, 2002). Habermas adds, the public sphere is "a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed. Access to the public sphere is open in principle to all citizens. … citizens act as a public when they deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion" (Habermas 1989, p. 231). From Habermas’ definition, one can conclude that for a sphere to be considered public it should enable citizens to form public opinions about matters that are of general interest; include people from all backgrounds; and guarantee the diversity of opinions.

The literature is rich with accounts about the public sphere (see, for example, Eickelman and Salvatore, 2002; Lowrey and Anderson, 2005; Ng and Detenber, 2005; Paulussen, 2004; Poor, 2005). While Eickelman and Salvatore (2002) work was critical of the ideal “Habermasian” conception of the public sphere, the others based their discussions about the public sphere on Habermas' model of the public sphere, which is probably why the conclusions they offered were in some ways similar to each other. For instance, it was observed that several of these studies acknowledge that the internet has the potential of facilitating democratic values; however, they also acknowledge the presence of several limitations.

For example, Cammaerts and Audenhove (2003) have shown that some internet environments do facilitate public spaces that foster civic engagement, but noted a number of limitations that stand in the way of the users of the internet. The limitations, according to Cammaerts and Audenhove (2003) relate to access, regulation of content, and gender inequality.

Poor (2005) is one of the few researchers who offered his own criteria for an online public sphere but still based them on Habermas' model of the public sphere. According to him a public sphere is a medium for discourse that is often mediated and allows new and previously excluded discussants to join the discussions. Furthermore, the issues discussed on a public sphere are often political in nature and the ideas put forward are judged by their own merit, not by the standing of the speakers (p. 4).

This paper will attempt to determine if the Al Arabiya site’s has some of the elements of an online public sphere as proposed by Poor (2005). It will also attempt to investigate the presence (or lack thereof) of any elements of the public sphere, as envisioned by Habermas, on the Al Arabiya site. For this reason this study is informed by the above public sphere literature.

3. THE AL ARABIYA SITE

The Al Arabiya site is one of the highly frequently accessed online media sites in the Arab world. According to the site owners (Al Arabiya, 2008), the Al Arabiya site receives one million page views a day. The site publishes articles on politics, business, sports, and variety and updates its contents by the minute. But what probably distinguishes the site from others like Al-Jazeera or BBC Arabic is the commentary service, which allows readers to comment on the articles published and also on the comments made by other readers. The service is located at the end of each published article. Users can access the comments and post their own replies after they scroll down through all the replies to a particular article.

The commentary service feature is not without its problems. Users' comments on articles or on the comments made by other readers do not appear on the site the moment they are sent; they are first examined by the site’s staff and then released if found appropriate. This means that if readers want to view what they posted they have to wait for sometime or visit the page they provided feedback to at a later time. The other distinguishing feature of the site is the Final Page, also called the special variety section, which the main page provides web links to and brief overviews of its topics. The Final Page focuses on the lighter side of the news. It reports on issues many readers consider immodest, controversial in nature or insensitive to their feelings. But that is probably what made it (and the site) very popular among the users.

The Al Arabiya is managed by a Saudi, Abdul Rahman Al Rashid, and owned also by Saudis (Feuilherade, 2003). The channel links with the Saudi government, however, has always cast doubt over its credibility and many critics have accused the channel of favouring Saudi Arabia. However, in a very short time, the Al Arabiya channel has proven to be capable of not only offering instant coverage of the news as it
breaks, but also for setting new standards in the usage of internet technology in the reporting of news. In addition to the innovative techniques its staff use in their reporting of news, the staff also try to concentrate on fast and catchy TV news from which they hope to deliver entertaining journalism (Al Arabiya, 2008).

4. THE SURVEY

The survey questionnaire was administered online, which means participants filled the questionnaire and returned it over the internet. Conducting the survey online was probably the most appropriate thing, due to issues such as convenience, cost, time and accessibility. To invite participants to take part in the survey, the researcher, on the 20th of June 2007, posted a brief comment (in Arabic) at the end of each article that was published on the Al Arabiya site that day. The comment contained, in addition to some information about the purpose of the study, the web link to the survey and the Charles Sturt University ethics approval number.

The questionnaire was divided into two parts: the demographic section which sought information on each participant’s age, sex, education and so on and the survey questions, which were of the open-ended type to allow a complete expression of a view. The questionnaire consisted of 17 items altogether. After eliminating, blank, repeated and incoherent responses, 97 responses were found to be usable for analysis.

Before the survey responses were analyzed, they were first coded to ease and facilitate analysis. Each response to a question (of the opened-ended questions) was assigned a category from a list of categories developed after 10% of the responses were thoroughly read and informally coded as suggested by Neuendorf (2002). The process of category development did not rely solely on the categories developed in the beginning of the analysis; additional categories were added to the list as the analysis continued. SPSS 14.0 for Windows was also used and involved mainly generating frequency tables and percentages for all the survey questionnaire items.

5. RESULTS

The demographic characteristics of the participants in the study are summarized in Table 1 below. Findings from this study show that while 14.4% of the participants visit the Al Arabiya site because they are very critical of it and suspicious about its direction 49.5% of the participants visit the site because it is a good news site that provides up-to-date information on what is happening in the Arab world. With regards to their reasons for also reading the readers’ comments, 60.8% of the respondents indicated that the reason they do so is because they are interested in knowing the opinions of the Arabs and their ways of thinking. The findings also showed that respondents gave three main reasons for commenting on the articles or the readers’ comments: the first reason, given by 16.5%, is because respondents want to express their opinions; the second reason, provided by 14.4% of the respondents, is because they feel inclined to respond if the contents of the articles or the readers’ comments provoked them; and the third reason for commenting, which 11.3% of the respondents mentioned, is to provide supplementary information or information that corrects what has been said or complete the picture about an issue. Readers of the Al Arabiya appeared to have gained a great deal from participating in the site. For example, 9.3% of the respondents said the main benefit from participating in the site was, in their case, knowing the opinions of the Arabs and their ways of thinking. On the other hand, 7.2% of them said their main benefit was the ability to express their opinions.

Table 1. Summary of the responses to the demographic questions

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is your gender?</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>89.7%</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>What is your age?</th>
<th>Age between 25 and 34 years</th>
<th>Age between 35 and 44 years</th>
<th>Age between 20 and 24 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>50.5%</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
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</table>

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<tr>
<th>What is your country of origin?</th>
<th>Participants originally from Saudi Arabia</th>
<th>Participants originally from Syria</th>
<th>Participants originally from Iraq</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30.9%</td>
<td>13.4%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
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<tr>
<th>What is your</th>
<th>Participants who have</th>
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6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that the comments on the site did not come from like-minded people; they must have come from a diverse group of people, as the profile of the participants suggest. Since the readers’ views were diverse, and the Arabic audience is known for being emotional (Bakkar, 2007), too much fighting and division among the readers must have occurred on the site and consensus must have been difficult to reach. These comments are supported by the fact that nearly 45% of the respondents in this study mentioned that they feel sad or upset when fighting takes place between commentators as a result of difference in opinion. This further suggests that the site does not appear to have met the facilitation of rational critical debates and reaching of consensus (Kaigo and Watanabe, 2007) criteria, which are essential ingredients in the public sphere model envisioned by Habermas. This conclusion is in line with the literature (see, for example, Cammaerts and Audenhove, 2003; Elvin, 2002; Ulrich, 2004).

The site, however, appears to have met two other requirements of the “Habermasian” conception of the public sphere, namely the presence of diversity of opinions in the site and the interactivity between readers and the articles published and between the readers themselves, which is an observation that has also been noted in an earlier study conducted by this researcher (see Al-Saggaf, 2006).

Moreover, while the online public sphere that the Al Arabiya facilitates does not meet all the requirements of the ideal public sphere outlined by Habermas, the site does satisfy some of Poor’s (2005) criteria for an online public sphere. The site is a medium for political discourse that is mediated online. Discussants come from all backgrounds including those previously excluded such as Arabs abroad; but although comments discussed are not replied to because of the standing of the speakers or their popularity, there is actually no mechanism on the site for judging or rating responses.

The findings also indicate that with the exception of the Saudis, many of the respondents access the Al Arabiya from places other than their countries of origin. For example, none of the eight Iraqis or the five Lebanese who responded to the survey actually lives in Iraq or Lebanon; they all live in countries like Norway and Belgium. This suggests that not only the Al Arabiya site offers Arab expatriates a medium to discuss their public affairs from abroad but it also allowed them to engage with what is happening in their countries, which may made them feel as participating citizens in the politics of their countries.

The results need to be considered in light of the following limitations. First, the results are limited to the Al Arabiya site only and should not be generalised to other media sites like Al-Jazeera or BBC Arabic. In fact, generalisations were not sought in this study. The aim was to merely report the perceptions of users in relation to their participation in one of the media sites in the Arab world. Second, the results are limited to the sample used (the 97 participants who completed the online questionnaire) and should not be generalised to the population as a whole. Third, since respondents do not need to register to post comments, their identity could not be verified which does raise the issue of the authenticity of respondents and the potential for deception. However, every effort was made to delete any responses that came from the same source by tracking the ip address of the respondent.
Despite the above limitations, this study is very significant in that hopefully it will pave the way for future research about the topic. For example, it would be very useful to examine in depth participation on the Al Arabiya site using a larger sample size and a complex statistical technique to understand not only the factors that affect participation but also the moderators and mediators that explain those factors. Other interesting questions that this study has raised include: Does this site facilitate a public sphere for the Arabs? If yes, what is the effect of this public sphere on the Arab world? Can the site facilitate a platform for political changes in the Arab world? Only further research will reveal the answers to these questions.

In a region where internet is censored, freedom of expression is limited and local media is controlled by governments, the Al Arabiya site through its feedback facility offers internet users a medium to discuss politics with each other and express their opinions about what is happening in their countries. The feedback facility available on the site allowed Arabs to not only discuss and debate issues that concern them as a group but also made them capable of contributing to the media content and challenging the truth about what is reported.

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