

Digital Governance and Democratization in the Arab World

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INTRODUCTION

Making the choice to be an Internet society is not a process governed simply by a state's attitudes towards computers and the data that flows between them. Rather, being an Internet society means fostering the wide embrace of perspectives modeled on the technology itself. The basic components of designing an Internet society include a commitment to the free flow of information across and among hierarchies; a belief that it is best not to privilege any single information node; a realization that censorship is difficult if not futile; and a commitment to the idea that communities, companies and individuals have the right to represent themselves within electronic landscapes. All of these information attitudes have spill over effects in the real world. While constructing an Internet society is also about building information infrastructure and teaching people to use new tools, it is the clear spill over effects linked with the technology's design principles that have most developing countries proceeding with caution. For many countries around the world, especially (semi) authoritarian ones, no matter how strong the economic incentives for being an Internet society are, politically and socially, accepting such processes of change without selective state intervention is uncommon. Nowhere are these interventions more apparent than in the puzzling mosaic of Internet led development in the Arab World.

This article entertains a series of questions regarding emerging Internet societies in the Arab World:

1. To what degree is the Internet spreading in the Arab World and what factors are most commonly driving (or inhibiting) these processes of technological change?
2. In what way is the Internet contributing to processes of political change in the region? And how is the authoritarian state intervening to regulate Internet use in an attempt to control the spill over effects of such use?
3. What might be the longer term impacts of emergent Internet cultures in the region?

BACKGROUND: INTERNET DIFFUSION IN THE ARAB WORLD

While the Internet has been evolving for the past five decades, it's presence as a part of everyday life in the Arab World is relatively new.¹ The first connections to the Internet in the region date back to the early 1990s. For example, Tunisia was the first Arab country to link to the Internet (1991). Kuwait established Internet services in 1992 as a part of its reconstruction after the Iraqi invasion. In 1993, Egypt, Turkey, and the UAE established links to the Internet. Jordan linked to the Internet in 1994; while Syria and Saudi Arabia were the slowest states in the region to allow public access to the Internet—with regular access not available until the late 1990s. In Syria for example, even as late as 1997, there were only two places with Internet access—the American Cultural Center and the Syrian Engineers' Association, both located in Damascus. When Bashar Al-Assad, former president of the Syrian Engineers' Association and son of the late Hafiz al-Assad became president of Syria June 10, 2000, Internet access began to be more readily available. Before then, many Syrians were obtaining access via long distance phone calls to Internet service providers (ISP) in Lebanon and Jordan. These same practices of long distance remote access to the Internet (this time via Bahrain) was also common in Saudi Arabia, before the state made access to the Internet available through locally licensed ISPs. Thus when we study the development and meaning of the

Table 1. Internet users by region 2004 (http://www.nua.com/surveys/how_many_online/index.html)

World Total	605.60 Million
Africa (5 million in South Africa)	6.31 Million
Asia/Pacific	187.24 Million
Europe	190.91 Million
Middle East (2.5 million in Israel)	5.12 Million
Canada and USA	182.67 Million
Latin America	33.35 Million

Table 2. Internet users in the MENA region 2001 (Adapted from NUA How Many On-Line, http://www.nua.com/surveys/how_many_online/index.html)

Country	Number of Users	Percent of Population
Algeria	180,000	0.57%
Bahrain	140,200	21.36%
Egypt	600,000	0.85%
Iran	420,000	0.63%
Iraq	12,500	0.05%
Jordan	212,000	3.99%
Kuwait	205,000	8.91%
Lebanon	300,000	11.22%
Libya	20,000	0.24%
Morocco	400,000	1.28%
Oman	120,000	4.42%
Palestine	103,000	3.03%
Qatar	60,000	7.59%
Saudi Arabia	570,000	2.5%
Sudan	70,000	.21%
Syria	60,000	0.35%
Tunisia	400,000	4.08%
UAE	900,000	36.79%
Yemen	17,000	0.09%
Total	4,902,200	2.45%

Table 3. (Madar Research, 2002)

Country	Number of Internet Cafes
Bahrain	90
Egypt	400
Iraq	50
Jordan	500
Kuwait	300
Lebanon	200
Libya	700
Oman	80
Palestine	60
Qatar	80
Saudi Arabia	200
Sudan	150
Syria	600
Tunisia	300
UAE	191
Yemen	120
Morocco	2,150
Algeria	3,000

Internet in the Arab World, we are really looking at a short, but rapidly changing history.

The general statistics are not encouraging with regards to information technology (IT) diffusion in the Arab World. The Arab World constitutes 4% of the world’s population, yet it contains less than 0.1% of the world’s Internet users. Moreover, world production in of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) equals 1.2 trillion dollars, while the Arab World’s share of this economy is tiny. According to its population size, the Arab World’s share of this global technology production should be 48 billion dollars; while in real terms, production of ICT in the region is only a fraction of this—Egypt: \$418 million; Saudi: \$642 million; Lebanon: \$400 million (2000 estimates). One factor which weakens production in ICT is the underutilization of female knowledge capital in the region. For example, women equal 63% of university students in the Arab World, and yet women constitute only 30% or less of the labor force (Shalhoub, 2003, p. 3).

Internet use disaggregated by country reveals great regional disparities.

Connectivity in the region ranges from high Internet penetration in countries like the United Arab Emirates (nearly 40% of the population is online) to places like Sudan, where only 0.2% of the population are Internet users. One problem with connectivity measures is that a large portion of society in the region goes on line at an Internet café or community access point (such as Publnet centers in Tunisia and Knowledge Stations in Jordan).

Current measures grossly underestimate the popularity of the Internet in everyday life by failing to capture users not tied to a particular Internet protocol (IP) address or ISP. Perhaps it is not by accident, that there is a strong correlation between the number of Internet cafes within a country and low connectivity figures by conventional measures.

Thus, in Algeria there is an estimated 0.57% Internet penetration, judged by the number of Internet accounts, but a high availability of Internet cafes, an estimated 9.52 cafes per 100,000 inhabitants. Similarly, in Libya, where per capita Internet penetration is estimated to be 0.24%, there are an estimated 13.21 Internet cafes per 100,000 inhabitants. Given the difficulties in determining what percentage of the population has access to the Internet via Internet cafes, it is hard to judge the mass appeal of the Internet. If in places like Algeria and Morocco, there is enough public demand for the Internet to support two or three thousand Internet cafes, then the Internet must be more important than indicated by conventional estimates. The large number of Internet cafes in the MENA region suggests that the Internet may be more of a mass technology than currently documented (Wheeler, 2004a).

Factors Shaping Internet Diffusion in the Arab World

There are at least nine factors which shape the diffusion and use of the Internet in the Arab World including:

1. Infrastructure
2. State

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