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Arab Citizen Journalism Shaped by Technology: Creates a Challenge to Mainstream Media, Authorities and Media Laws

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ABSTRACT

Citizens of the Arab world have harnessed new technologies ranging from online news sites, blogs, vblogs, YouTube, podcasts to SMS text messages, mobile phone web publishing, and facebook groups to produce and disseminate their journalism and advocacy faster than government can control, regulate or censor it.

Similar to their western counterparts, citizen journalism enthusiasts fueled by the new communication revolution, both technologically and philosophically have chipped into government media hegemony and private media powers, causing a deeply seated fear of their empowerment.

Taking advantage of a plethora of these innovative technologies and open source tools to become reporters and activists, many Arabs both intentionally and unintentionally, have provided significant reports, analysis and commentaries and mobilization for causes when mainstream media has been absent. Often their product has had powerful implications, sometimes of national importance, not only confronting mainstream media and authorities for their deficiencies, but also challenging existing press laws and legal boundaries.

This paper presents a qualitative assessment of citizen journalism and activism efforts throughout the region in the last few years by shedding light on the technologies accessed and used and the results of specific efforts. Using technology determinism theories to frame this empowerment, this paper will examine the unique qualities of these technologies that allow for an environment of carte blanche communication expressions, mobilization, and citizen story telling bringing more democracy and civic engagement to the region.

The paper will investigate various examples of citizen journalism including the highlighting of incidents of sexual harassment in Egypt, promotion of Berber nationalism in North Africa the politicized messages promoting Lebanon's Cedar revolution, the mobilization of people by the Kefaya movement in Egypt, the dissent of the younger members of the Muslim Brotherhood via new technologies, monitoring of feminists actions in Saudi Arabia, the liberals

who advocate for more personal freedoms, the Arab socialism revivalists via e-groups, the female Arab Christian thinkers, the atheists, the critics of the Bahraini rulers, the Darfur video bloggers and the formation of royalists facebook groups in Egypt.

As people have become more engaged in citizen media and have become more involved in transforming the way information is gathered and is disseminated, they have served not only to create more information and to shift the balance of power away from traditional sources, they are also giving the opportunity for those voices that had never been heard and those voices that have converged in opposition to oppression in the Arab world to be heard outside of their confinements. This has triggered an often fierce reaction by security apparatuses in the region. For this reason, the paper will also analyze the region for current laws and methods used to govern those nationals who do choose to join the growing number of global citizen journalists.

Finally the paper will attempt to evaluate the relationship between Arab Citizen journalism and the process of democratization in the region.

Keywords- Citizen Journalism- Cyber Activism- Alternative Media - Democratization

Introduction

Arab Citizens looking for methods to mobilize support for their ideas, influence others and pressure governments with their demands and their opinions have harnessed new communication technologies to disseminate their journalism and activism. This has resulted in fundamental transformations in mainstream media agendas and has caused a shift in government response toward them.

Fueled by technologies that have been noted to promote democracy and social change in an increasingly globalized world marked with interconnected communication networks (Castells 2008) these citizen journalists were initially triggered by the divisive 2004 war in Iraq to disseminate their communicative expressions. Using news websites, discussion bulletins, internet groups and emails Arabs in and out of the region could discuss, editorialize and argue about the war. (Hamdy & Mobarak, Iraq War Ushers in Web-Based Era, 2004) In a similar fashion to their global counterparts Arabs also quickly took to the open source technology of blogs to post their stories and commentaries immediately challenging both the static fare provided by mainstream media and government restrictions. (Levinson, 2005) Naturally their efforts did not stop at blogging but have spread to you tubing, facebook and twitters. (Fam, 2008) In addition, with the great expansion of mobile technology, citizens were further empowered to blog from their phones, take pictures and videos to add to their messages. (UAE most wired country in Arab world, 2008)

Arab Citizens have been consciously using these new technologies as they emerge to fill the void created by media's ignoring of important events and issues. A media that has been disconnected from the public needs for many years. They have also used these technologies to

spawn activist movements and ideologies, including the propagation of radicalized Islam. The question to be answered by this paper is whether the availability of these technologies created their behavior and whether these authors have been able to impact mainstream media in the Arab region, and how they are perceived by governments.

The paper will also attempt to look at how the existing media laws fail to address the rights of citizen journalists. Finally the study will attempt to evaluate the link between digital technologies and the democratization process in the region.

Literature Review

It is believed that new technologies like satellite television and the internet have played a democratizing function and have helped in establishing a civil society in the Arab Region.

Despite the fact that democratization has taken place at a very slow pace, none-the-less the literature suggests that many of these changes can be attributed to a swift and dramatic change in the media landscape. The Arab satellite revolution with its liberating force may have had most of the focus of media scholars, however the Internet too has been seen as a medium that is likely to have profound implications for democratization in the region. (Annabelle, 2001; Sakr, 2001; El-Nawawy & Iskandar, 2002)

In fact, there is a clear show of determinism that is part of the overflow of enthusiasm and optimism about new technology and democratic participation in a debate originating in the West. Digital interactive media is seen as a vehicle for citizen participation in the democratic process. The Internet is touted for that capacity because of its choice of open architecture which contrasts to earlier traditional communications media with their limitations. For that reason the internet

allows for diversity of opinion, ideas and information, setting the ground for a more grassroots discourse. It also allows for more complete information which is a corner stone of democracy. An added bonus is the relative low barriers to entry, the possibility of many to many communication and its decentralized organization, all collectively leading to this utopian vision. (Berman & Daniel, 1997) Many discussions of the Internet center around technological determinism or the notion that technology leads to social change. This change refers to both increased democracy and implicit increased freedom. (Barlow, 1996) In fact several technological optimists such as (Bell, 1973), (Barber, 1984) and (Toffler, 1980) have already asserted that with the onset of the information society the Internet has the potential to enhance democratic practice. Following its public availability in the 1990's enthusiasts viewed these emerging technologies as able to create a return to the direct democracy of ancient Greece. (Gilder, 1992; Rheingold, 1992/2000)

In turn because of the global nature of the internet it is assumed by technological determinists that the same principle can apply globally.

Conversely, critics contend that the advent of new digital technologies are only automating existing democracy rather than enabling such social changes. Others believe that technology may even exacerbate obstacles that already exist. (Walton, 2007; Sparks C. , 2005) Other researchers argue that the Internet remains in control of powerful groups and some argue for revisiting previous Internet organization's jurisdictions. (Schiller, 1996; Lips & Jaap, 2005)

These critics may have a good argument, none the less, the case has been made that the Internet does at least give the voiceless a voice. For instance, one message on a blog can be magnified multiple times if the audience find it relevant. In fact with the increase of wireless mobile

devices Joi Ito makes the argument that this will boost “moblogging”, that is posting pictures, videos and texts from mobile phones and the use of wikis - a track back weblog, that these tools may enable a higher-level order that can help create an emergent democracy that the world needs more than ever. (Ito, 2003)

Yes, blogs have had political power, cell phones have been used to organize opposition, and internet connections have been problematic to monitor, however it is arguable whether this increase in free flow of information afforded by these technologies have had any real impact on authoritarian regimes. There are anecdotal examples to illustrate both sides of this coin. There are incidents such as the Ukrainian “Orange Revolution” when rigged elections were reversed but on the other hand there are governments such as that of China that succeeded in intimidating Google to comply with their policies. (Walton, 2007)

Certainly the Arab region has had its share of notable blogging, mobilizing, text messaging, twittering and facebook activism that has not gone unnoticed neither by the local nor international communities.

The introduction of new interactive digital media to the Arab societies has unleashed energy, creativity and bottled up ideas that simply did not exist before. The diversity of views, extraordinary discourse and exchange of information represented in this medium is unprecedented. Algerians can discuss Berber nationalism, Egyptian women can campaign to fight corruption and the Sudanese can raise awareness of their plight in Darfour. Politicized messages promoting changes such as the case of Lebanon’s Cedar revolution and Egyptian secularists. These are voices that were not heard before. ⁱ (urls available as endnote)

This type of activity may be viewed as a catalyst for democracy. There is much belief that Citizen journalism has impacted mainstream media, irked governments and helped Arabs gain higher levels of freedom, yet some scholars insist that there is little evidence that it has made the region more democratic. (Best & Wade, 2005)

Many critics also believe that because internet use and access are not very high, then these messages are not necessarily reaching a critical mass. According the United Nations Millennium Development Goals report the average number of internet connections in the Arab countries is way below the world average. Less than 10% of the population use the internet. Yet, access and use are growing at a fast pace.

However, citizen journalism has impacted traditional media too. Here, the critics argument would be weak as traditional media particularly television enjoys a high penetration amongst the Arab peoples. So even those who have never seen a facebook account can still receive a powerful group message when its messages are replayed on national television.

The following section looks at the impact that these technology enabled citizens have had on traditional media as a first stop analysis of the concept of an emergent democracy.

Citizen Journalism Impacts the Traditional Media

Despite variances between different countries in the Arab Region, by and large most print and broadcast media have long been controlled. This resulted in much out dated content being presented to the audiences for several decades until the arrival of satellite television. Satellite television revolutionized media in the region, allowing for alternate opinions and thoughts. But that was not the only venue for such variation.

Suppressed views also began to appear with the introduction of another new medium, the Internet. With opposition websites to censored newspaper articles appearing online, it became clear that citizens instinctively knew how to harness the power of the Internet. (Sreberny, 2001) Later, as the newer internet blogging technology platform became popular world-wide, Arabs too enlisted as members of the blogosphere.

Convention has it that Salam Pax the Iraqi architect who blogged from Baghdad during the 2004 war was the First Arab to blog. (Hamdy & Mobarak, 2004) But he was not alone for long. More and more bloggers came on board adopting this platform to express their opinions on topics that that rarely had been approached publicly. With English content that reflected mostly the views and psyche of the westernized elites Sand Monkey, Baheyya, Riverbend, Sabah's Blog, The Black Irish Blog, the Arabist and Ghalia's Cocktail Blog grabbed the attention of their readers. (Lynch, 2007)

These early bloggers addressed sensitive political issues, human rights abuses and other societal problems. They also discovered the power of their writings. They found that their blogs could provide freer information, compete with newspapers and television, become a tool for mobilization and attract like-minded citizens, and frequently attract international attention to their plights. (Levinson, 2005)

It is hard to pin point exactly what happened next, but it is safe to say that soon after a large number of bloggers began to blog in their native language of Arabic. Expanding the blogger base, the reader base and their impact. New enabled voices began to blog furiously across the blogosphere. The most notable of these early successful online activism stories has been that of the Kefaya movement. An Egyptian opposition movement that included a variety of

opposition parties and had a strong online component to its organization. Using mailing lists, emails, discussion groups and more importantly blogging - their protests had an initial success. Individual bloggers gained fame through this movement, some like Alaa Abdel Fatah gained time in prison. (Zuckerman, 2006) Other notable citizen journalists include Wael Abbas the author of the Egyptian Awareness Blog, who not only blogged during the Kefaya movement but raised awareness of police brutality frequency, when he posted a video depicting police violence and latter scooped a story on female harassment in Cairo. (Mansour, 2007) Bahrain's blog and moblog 2005 directed protests (Schleusener, 2007) and Lebanon's extensive debate following Hariri's assassination and the ensuing Mehlis report are also representative of these notable blogging moments. (Hamdy, *Alternative Arab Voices: A Depiction of the Usage of Blogs in Cyberspace*, 2006)

Encouraged by earlier bloggers and their ability to be heard many more bloggers joined their ranks. Today it is estimated that there are more than 40, 000 Arabic blogs, in relation to internet penetration in the region this is a substantial number. (*Implacable Adversaries: Arab Governments and the Internet*, 2006) As Internet use grows in the Arab region and as a wider range of voices are heard on the Internet, cyber-activists are potentially positioned to become more influential.

Certainly, the majority of the blogs may not contain significant content, but some of these bloggers have created an elite force that has been empowered by technology and is creating an impact on their readers, ordinary citizens and the traditional media.

Arab media cannot eternally maintain its hegemony, citizen journalism is challenging their control over audiences. Alternative media is not only attracting readers but have directly changed the mainstream media's agenda.

Media scholar Marc Lynch 2007 has observed the influence of these acts of citizen journalism. Dividing Arab bloggers into three categories of into activists, bridge- bloggers, and public sphere bloggers he has noted their heightened power during political peaks that affect the region.

With their no-holds-barred approach these bloggers have challenged Arab media, a media that has more than often steered clear of the mention of contentious issues. There have been several well documented cases where bloggers forced media to bring these issues to their agenda and other cases where the media were inspired by their efforts. Arab media could no longer ignore internet activities as they began to incorporate citizen journalism tips and notes in their coverage, chase the same stories, interview bloggers, and facebook activists, invite them to their talk shows and often openly approve of their candor.

A legendary case in point, is that of the bloggers who exposed the sexual harassment incident that took place during a public holiday in Downtown Cairo in 2006. Mainstream state media chose to ignore the issue for several days. However when the Associated Press and satellite television channels picked up the story from blog entries, it eventually hit media with considerable power. No longer the report of an incident but a topic for public debate, mainstream media became a forum for discussing the plight of women in a country where sexual harassment is a commonly practiced social ill. (Tahawy, 2006)

Another noteworthy documentation, is that of the Muslim Brotherhood Internet experience in Egypt. Following the ban of their official website in 2004 they learnt how to decentralize their message by moving their presence to eighteen sites promoting their individual political candidates. Encouraged by the Kefaya movement's use of cyber activism the outlawed opposition group has taken to online communication furiously, with tens of individual bloggers partaking in the blogging of personal narratives of the Mubarak government's abuse of their members and challenging their brotherhood elders with their tech savvy approach to dissidence. These compelling stories often made their way into traditional media. (Ajemian, 2008)

In a recent incident, that of Egypt's April 6 "facebook movement", direct impact on mainstream media has been recorded. As the disaffected citizen journalists move on to newer technologies such as the popular social networking facebook, Egypt has witnessed a group of citizens mobilize 80,000 supporters to protest the raise in food prices of 2008. The facebook group broadened support for a textile workers protest and simultaneously became a topic of coverage for mainstream media. Both state-owned and independent media gave considerable mention to the lobbying of the facebook group. Not to mention the increased coverage following the arrest of the young woman Israa Abdel Fatah the group creator. (Masloski, 2008)

In addition, evidence also shows that prior to the first facebook girl arrest, that as soon as facebook use became popular in Egypt many lively groups appeared instantly. During Ramadan of 2008 one the most popularly viewed television dramas on Arab satellite television was that of "King Farouk". The popularity of this drama generated a series of royalist facebook groups that carried pictures, information and even letters from members of Egypt's former monarchy. Youtube has was also quickly populated by Royal family memorabilia, interviews and other such

curios. Young people paid attention. The unusualness of this occurrence caused for several highly viewed talk shows to refer to these groups and Youtube postings. Creators of the groups were invited to the shows and print media wrote about them.

Another remarkable example of the influence of citizen journalism came about in Kuwait. In January of 2006 when the death of the Emir increased audience traffic on the internet, bloggers took advantage of the situation and lobbied for a reduction in the number of electoral districts prior to the parliamentary elections. The “Orange Movement” campaign was successful in part because voters could read blog entries in daily newspapers, amplifying their impact.(Lynch, 2007)

But these are not the only cases of direct measurable impact on the media, there have been many. One of the more unusual influences has been the case of the Israel-Hizbollah conflict of 2006 where a marriage of alternative and traditional mediums was noted. An unusual blend of cross media platforms were used to cover this war extensively by Internet bloggers and traditional media, with both types of communicators covering and analyzing each others output. Traditional journalists posted shocking war images on their personal blogs, whilst bloggers analyzed and commented on the media. Some mainstream media took this marriage a step further by hiring citizen journalists to blog for their media outlet. A sizeable amount of the information flow was contributed via new technologies. Bloggers, Youtubers and others both in and out of Lebanon and hand in hand with newspaper reporters, radio commentators and television journalists ferociously added to the story. (Ward, 2007)

Research and commentary and analysis on this impact are abundant in the literature on the changes that have taken place on the Arab media landscape.

In actual fact, Citizen journalist also credit themselves with what they perceive as their powerful impact on traditional media. They believe that they have emerged as strong alternative media as they do not have the same political agenda that the mainstream have. They also cite the use of citizen journalism news reports, video clips and pictures by traditional journalists, and the cooperation between citizen journalists and mainstream journalists as evidence that they had actually raised the ceiling on press freedoms whilst influencing traditional media. (Zekri, 2008)

None-the-less it is difficult to find mainstream media professionals willing to acknowledge this people power. In an interview with veteran publisher Hisham Kassem he did not acknowledge that citizen journalism in the Arab region had such a strong influence. Because of limited resources that these citizens have, they could not in his opinion replace traditional media. Blogger's most important role has been that of "watchdog of the watchdog" often causing media to be more accountable for their work. Citizen journalists can be the Arab world's fifth estate, monitoring it's stale and unethical fourth estate. Emphasizing that their influence is particularly strong on the new independent media, Kassem views these activated citizens as an army of alert observers who publish their comments, post their reactions, criticisms and analysis instantly. (Personal Communication, February, 28, 2008)

A role that citizen journalists such as Jordanian blogger Naeem Tarawnah also acknowledges. Tarawnah asserts that bloggers can stand afar and comment instantly on media by expressing their views on every worked printed or broadcasted in the Arab or foreign press on the region. (Tarawnah, 2008)

Kassem further admits that even though citizen journalists could not replace mainstream media reporting they have however on several occasion acted as foot soldiers for Arab journalists

by going out and fighting on the field first, pushing the envelope and achieving more press freedom. His comment indicates that despite his reluctance to admit the challenge there has been a power shift.

It bears mentioning that whether local media acknowledge this impact or not, there is strong evidence that Arab citizen journalists have certainly grabbed the attention of western media.

It is hard to think of a single prestigious publication or broadcast station that has not covered the efforts of the rising activism performed by Arabs using the Internet and other digital technologies. From The Financial Times to the Washington Post from CNN to the BBC the highlight has been on the democratizing effects of blogs, You tube, yahoo groups and Facebook vis a vis the Arab region. Immortalized for their calls for political, economic and social reforms this elite group of communicators have learnt to court the western press. Even those voices who were initially marginalized for their conservative political views such as the Muslim Brotherhood bloggers eventually gained their share of the spotlight. (Ajemian, 2008)

There is also considerable evidence that it is possible to link to Arab blogs through the pages of prestigious newspapers and other international media online. In that sense a reader of the LA Times is more likely to receive information from an Arab blogger than to ever read an article in the *Sharq Al Awsat* or *Ahram* newspaper. These bloggers also have an equal chance of impacting individual western journalists who are also reading and observing these blogs. (Lynch, 2007)

If it were not for this precise impact on traditional media, cyberspace may have remained a safe and exclusive domain for a few influential opinion leaders to discuss the issues that concern them. It was probably when these internet deliberations moved so quickly to a wider public that governments began to respond.

Authorities Confronted and Media Laws Challenged

In most countries in the Arab regions, governments have promoted the Internet and other digital technologies. They are perceived as a symbol of modernity, sophistication and development mechanism that must be supported as it would attract foreign investment and could ultimately cause for a leap into the information society. They have aggressively encouraged the adoption of new information and communication technologies. Indeed these new information highways have on the whole not been hindered by Arab governments. To the extent that newly created democratic spaces were not challenged, citizens enjoyed unprecedented flows of information unbothered by the authorities, that is until they noticed that all this freedom could lead to unintended consequences.

Cyber-activists have since been arrested, detained, harassed, pressured, assaulted and even sentenced across the region. Adopting crude methods of intimidation several Arab governments have used draconian measures to control the digital voices of dissent. Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia have all been guilty of offenses.

In Egypt, Alaa Abdel Fatah author of the award winning “Alaa and Manal’s bit bucket” blog was detained by authorities following his involvement with the Kefaya movement online. (Reporters Without Borders, 2006) Karim Abdel Amer is still in prison following his four year

sentence for his atheist postings and insults of President Mubarak. Abdel Moneim Mahmoud the Muslim Brotherhood blogger was arrested but not charged. (Blogger Abdul Moneim Freed, But Kareem Amer Still Held, 2007) Wael Abbass charges that the government of Egypt pressured You Tube administrators into dropping his video posts (Anderson, 2007) and Saudi Arabian blogger Fouad Ahmed Al-Farhan was released after four months in prison with no charge. (Ambah, 2008)

Morocco's Fouad Mourtada was accused of usurping the identity of a member of the royal family on facebook. (Williams, 2008) Although later pardoned it is one more example of an Arab government's over reaction to the democratic space. Tunisian courts have sentenced Slim Boukhdar for his blogging (Critical writer jailed in Tunisia, 2007) and the UAE has censored controversial blog content. (Weblogs soar in Gulf states , 2006) The list is long and continues to be updated.

Others have not been arrested or harassed but have had their sites sabotaged, rendering them ineffective. Saudi Eve and others women in Saudi Arabia have been blocked as a consequence of the wrath of the conservative bloggers who search the internet scouring for unsuitable female expression and reporting them to government censors. (Abou-Alsamh, 2006) Similarly, Coptic blogger Hela Botros was obliged to close down her blog due to Egypt police pressure, but this was before the Council of State Administrative Court ruled that authorities can block or suspend any site that threatens Egypt's "national security". No need to pressure, it is legal to shut down the root of the problem to the government. (Reporters Without Borders, 2006)

Governments from Morocco to Syria to Oman are struggling with ways to minimize the damage caused by Twitters, Blogs, Youtube, Second Life, Text messaging, Flickr, Facebook,

Podcasts and so on. Governments are becoming more aware that this is only the first generation of virtual civil society gatherings and activities. Soon social networking will move to the cell phone; producing millions of members (Shannon, 2008) and facilitating more of the dreaded cyber-activism.

As previously mentioned, for decades these Governments had become accustomed to controlling the flow of information through state-owned or state approved media. With the introduction of satellite television and the Internet the Arab world has slowly changed and Governments have reluctantly accepted alternative views and controversial opinions albeit in crab like steps, in a forward backward forward motion. (Media Sustainability Index (MSI) – Middle East & North Africa (MENA), 2005)

In this context, it can be said that Governments have despite the added headache that comes with these new technologies accepted what they bring. In some instances this has not been the case as noted earlier. However this may simply be because of the lack of legislation to regulate these novel environments.

In the absence of laws that address digital content there is a huge gap in terms of content regulation. The majority of countries in the region have instituted laws that address the technical aspects of the digital era. In rare instances there is any mention of content or issues related to freedom of speech in these new laws. Furthermore, digital writers are not treated as journalists or broadcast professionals, thus press laws cannot be used to protect them. It is for this reason that when there has been prosecution of content authors, penal codes have been used.

Media is transiting, the old methods by which media functioned are changing profoundly. The laws that were used to govern the old forms of media are no longer valid. Recently the Arab

governments have responded to that dilemma by ratifying the Arab Charter for Satellite Television. Although strongly criticized by opponents ("Arab Media: How Governments Handle the News", 2008) it has been embraced by officials, some media scholars and various professionals. (Allam, 2008)

Similarly the debate on Internet governance has also taken root. During the 2006 Tunis Convention of the Arab Interior Ministers Council a call on Arab countries to unite their effort to ward off terrorism and to enact legislation that would allow them to fight communication that promotes extremism was made. (Implacable Adversaries: Arab Governments and the Internet) If such legislation is adopted higher control will be given to government arms with regards to online communication. This could undermine the efforts of Arab citizen journalism.

Yet, regional regulation would not work for a global medium. Furthermore with the variance in cultural habits, traditions and customs amongst countries of the region it would be difficult to find a common ground. For instance, in the case of Saudi Arabia which is a very conservative society, it was the actual citizens who sent in hundreds of suggestions a day on what sites the government should block. (Walton, 2007) In other countries such as Egypt the Internet has no access limitations to date. However, the government is currently drafting new audio-visual laws that if passed, would propose severe punishment to those who deviate norms through the transmission of offensive material on any digital platform. (El Sayed, 2008)

In essence, reactions to digital content have differed from one country to another. Ranging from those who use filters to block undesirable sexual, religious and culture content such as the UAE to those who like Egypt are mostly concerned with political incitement.

Despite fears expressed by proponents of Internet freedoms that there is a regional regulation framework currently underway, this may not yet be the case. Nonetheless, the future may see a push toward a regional regulator particularly with an increase in threats to the ruling regimens from Islamic groups. (Personal Communication Media Scholar and author of Satellite Charter Dr. Hussein Amin June 16, 2008)

Perhaps Arabs have no plans to collaboratively regulate the digital highways however, earlier during the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) 2005 a dialogue between world governments and the Internet community began, indicating that a global process could be underway. The signs show that there is an emerging conceptual framework that will involve governments from around the world, the private sector, civil society and the Internet community to be used for global governance of the medium. (Kummer, 2007) Sure there are apprehensions that range from limitations on freedom of expression and human rights to an unbalance in the relationship between governments and civil society but inevitably this initiative can also lead to the tackling of global issues of concern.

Discussion

Having said all this, the question emerges as to whether the Internet and related technologies so readily adopted by Arab citizen journalists has had an effect on democratizing the region. Yes we have seen an exponential growth in amount of information and its flow. It is also true that there is an intense expansion in communicative spaces and ideological variety. Furthermore, more communication is occurring among citizens which is also of vital importance

to theories of democracy. But this is still not a guarantee that ICT empowerment will lead to democracy.

We have witnessed embryonic movements gain small success, such as the case of Kefaya and the case of Kuwait bloggers or the April 6 facebook strike but is important, too, to keep a balanced perspective and not to exaggerate the impact of these events.

It is also important to accept that the Arab citizen's consciousness-values beliefs and moral reasoning must support the democratic idea before a democracy evolves. No amount of text messaging, YouTubing or Wikipeding can bypass that consent. The ethics of democracy rotate around the notion that people can make rational decisions to govern themselves. The Arab people have not reached this consensus. The internet may have increased the space for discourse, exchange of ideas, and engagement but the reality is that if the Arab world is becoming more democratic; then it is doing so at a painfully slow rate. To date with little exception there is not a single government that can be described as truly democratically elected. Yes social action can be enhanced by technologies but it cannot force an active involvement of citizenry.

And as Ito (2003) warns new technologies can also empower terrorists or totalitarian regimes. Terrorists, jihadis and other radicals have proved to have been empowered by these technologies. So too can authoritarian rulers be empowered. Undoubtedly these technologies can either enhance or deteriorate democracy. In the Arab context the verdict has not yet been made.

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ⁱ For Berber Nationalism See The Moor Next Door Blog <http://themoornextdoor.wordpress.com/2008/04/11/an-ambiguous-profile-at-the-bbc/>

For Women's Anti Corruption Call See Nadafa.Org <http://www.nadafa.org/en/>

For Darfur Crisis See You Tube Clip of Suliman Hamid Sudan Communist Party view <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2cPLQB-xCFE>

For a Secularist's Blog. See The Egypt Blog <http://theegyptblog.blogspot.com/2005/12/wafaa-sultans-speech-in-coptic.html>

For promotion the Cedar Revolution See Hootsbuddy's Place <http://hootsbuddy.blogspot.com/2005/05/cedar-revolution.html>

For Egypt analysis and Commentary See Baheya <http://baheyya.blogspot.com/>