

'Bloggers and the Emergence of a New *Tribalism* in Saudi Arabia: An Insider's Experience'.

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Abstract:

This paper addresses two main topics: First, it looks at how Blogging in Saudi Arabia is forming itself and presenting a community that in standing for one another resembles that act of tribe members in the Arabian deserts. Second, it presents the author's own experience as a Saudi female writer and Blogger in the digital age.

1. Introduction

The emergence of the Internet had a great impact on people's lives every where, but when it comes to more traditional or conservative societies, its impact on local communities becomes more evident. The Internet was made available to the public in Saudi Arabia in 1998 and it soon became popular especially among the younger generation. Different aspects of the internet grabbed the attention of this youthful community of users, but communicating with their peers, locally and internationally, overcoming social boundaries and restrictions was undoubtedly top of the list. Young Saudis became regular active users in chat rooms, forums, mailing groups and so forth.

The 1990s introduced the web to the world and the 2000s are introducing the new generation of it; *Web 2.0*¹ with its hugely divers users who are becoming more IT and digital literate. The new generation of the web is focusing on people rather than applications. The web content is created by users and it is evaluated by them as well. Hence the web is becoming more interactive and “alive” by this interactivity. Humans (not the software) are adding significance to the web and its dynamic content by contributing and collaborating with each other across the globe.

¹ O'reially, What is Web 2.0? Retrieved [25-5-08] from <http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/news/2005/09/30/what-is-web-20.html>

A Blog is a well-known web 2.0 application, which is an interactive Journal-like application. It is replacing former personal websites due to its interactive nature that promotes sharing and collaboration, which have gradually expanded building a community of Blogs. In places like the Arab World, where community ties are strong and people are brought-up to be loyal to those who are belong to the same religion, set, city or tribe and where Tribalism with its rules and obligations are well regarded; examining the depth of the relationships created in the cyber space reveals new interesting fact. This will be discussed in greater details in the following sections.

2. Blogging in Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabia, Blogging started most probably at the end in 2003 but gained much greater audiences and contributors in the last two years. In 2006 for example it has been cited that between 500 and 600 active Blogs exists², written both in English and Arabic, by both young men and women aged 18-35 from all over the kingdom. The topics posted and elaborated in such Blogs range from personal experiences or memoirs to more political and social Blogs as well as those which touche the religious, or on the contrary, the erotica and sexual controversies. Some choose to use their real names and those tend to be men and others choose nicknames like most female Bloggers. The Blogging Community in Saudi Arabia is indeed diverse, reflecting different spectrums in the society, although the majority of Bloggers are somewhere in the middle. However, as much as those Bloggers differ, disagree and sometimes dislike each other, they have proven to unite under a common cause in the most critical of situations. In addition, almost all of them would argue for the importance of freedom of speech for the Blogging community to grow confidently and rapidly.

Two recent incidents, where one Blogger was detained³ (Mr.Fouad Al-Farhan)⁴, another suddenly went into a coma for three weeks before passing away (Miss Hadel Al-Hodaif)⁵, have generated a great degree of sympathy and highlighted the strong bond that connects its members. The awareness campaign and the constant reminder of those two cases were extraordinary and very unusual since the Saudi community

² BBC online: *Saudi Arabia's bold young bloggers*,

Retrieved [25-5-08] from: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6055382.stm

³ Washingtonpost online: *Dissident Saudi Blogger Is Arrested*, Retrieved [25-5-08] from: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/12/31/AR2007123101915.html>

⁴ <http://www.alfarhan.org/>

⁵ <http://www.hdeel.ws/blog/>

has almost no history of this sort of civil campaigning and grouping due to historical reasons, for example the county has never been under colonisation or had to fight for its independence. In a time and age where people in the region could not get any more divided and where some sectors of the community are choosing to embrace their tribes, religious schools or ethnic groups even stronger, a new tribe is emerging: the Blogger's tribe. This tribe, just like any other, has members who share a strong bond with each other and guard their values with such honor. However, what makes this tribe unlike any other is that its members are not born into it, but rather willingly choose to join and integrate. The guarded values here are global: freedom, equality, respect and justice, while other traditional values do not fade away completely, but tend to sit at the end of the line with the majority of Bloggers. However, it has been noticed, to some extent, that the line which divides conservatives and liberals is occasionally seen, resulting in some minor cyber battles.

3. The impact of the Internet on Saudi women: A personal Perspective

Growing up as a young writer in Saudi Arabia, who tried in her teens to get her words published despite social restrictions, such as mobility and dealing with the opposite sex, the internet was an excellent solution to most of the limitations I was facing. By browsing the web, I got an easy and constant access to a new newspaper called "Al-Watan", to which I later started e-mailing my articles and comments that found their way into print in the *Discussion* (To the editor) page. This continued even when I was in England between 2002 and 2003 doing my Masters degree. Almost three years later, I became an official weekly writer in the Opinion's Column. I started to get direct feedback from the readers on my newspapers e-mail address. This opened up a whole new community in front of me although those comments were not always pleasant. As a woman, writing to a large extent about women's position in society and challenging some of the long traditions that became official laws as well as challenging some of the unspoken rules that undermine females, I was often labeled one way or another. It needless to say, my articles did not make me popular among those who regarded the current situation as ideal and who accused anybody who attempted to discuss women's issues openly as *brain-washed* and an *enemy of Islam*.

My one-to-one communication with the readers was interesting enough, yet when I started my Blog in 2006⁶, it was totally different experience. This new one-to-many approach of feedback and communication had added a great value to those articles and gave me a great insight to the topics that I have touched from one aspect or another in my articles. Moreover, the Blog created new friendships and brought new opportunities. Inspired by the *wiki*⁷ phenomena and technology, where authors collaborate actively in writing a script (for example Wikipedia⁸), I wrote a post on my Blog suggesting a "wiki" article, where the fellow Bloggers and visitors collaboratively write one of my weekly articles. The idea was to test if this concept is still valid when it comes to an intellectual and opinionated type of writing. The experiment was successful and the end result was published in the newspaper after two weeks of discussions on my Blog. Recently, while still under the effect of the tragic loss of our fellow Blogger Hadeel, I have written a post that was encouraging more communication among Bloggers to know each other better and asking what is the best way to do it? Is it through another Blog? Facebook? Mailing list? A fellow Blogger (Ahmed Al-Omran)⁹ has put this idea immediately into action and created a dedicated social network called: Saudi Bloggers.¹⁰

4. Conclusion:

The Internet in the early days played a major role in helping me become an established writer in one of Saudi Arabia's major newspapers as well as to become a freelancer and writer with other Saudi media publications. It was a bridge which I have used to cross the gap and restrictions faced by female writers created by society's strict rules and barriers in terms of mobility and communication. However, the new generation of the Web known as Web 2.0 is helping me to gain a wider exposure to readers, both locally and globally, due to its social and collaborative nature. This is true not only through my Blog, but also through my *flicker* (photos), *YouTube* (videos), *facebook* (social network), *LinkedIn* (Professional Resume), and *Twitter* (instant messaging) accounts.

⁶ My former Blog: <http://www.maktoobblog.com/> and in February 2008 I moved to my own domain: <http://meccawy.com/>

⁷ Wikipedia: *Wiki* , Retrieved [25-5-08] from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki>

⁸ <http://www.wikipedia.org/>

⁹ <http://saudijeans.org/>

¹⁰ <http://saudibloggers.ning.com>

New generation of readers are interested in communicating with their favourite writers and exchanging opinions accordingly. Thus, writers who choose to keep to their ivory towers are likely to be overshadowed soon. Media is no longer a one-way street, where the majority of people are passive consumers and receivers; it is indeed a two-way or many-to-many type of communication.

Being a part of the Blogging community in Saudi Arabia has allowed me to witness its emergence and rapid growth as well as to experience its challenges first hand. Moreover, I was able to observe the strong bond and mutual understanding and constant support among Bloggers. This new form of loyalty in this part of the world which resembles what is experienced in a tribal community states that "one for all and all for one" with its own revolutionary values that are about to shape this community and its future.