TRANSFORMING SPACES: WOMEN’S USE OF COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

by

Megan Miller

A Senior Honors Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of The University of Utah In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Honors Degree in Bachelor of Arts

In

Middle East Studies

Approved:

Caren J. Frost, Ph.D., MPH
Supervisor

Robert Goldberg
Chair, Middle East Center

Peter von Sivers
Department Honors Advisor

Dr. Sylvia D. Torti
Dean, Honors College

June 2012
ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the use of communication technology by women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and how it relates to concepts of private and public space, i.e., gendered spatial segregation. Using available scholarship and data on female Internet usage in the MENA region as well as several blogs written by MENA women, women’s different uses of blogs, chat rooms, and Facebook are analyzed to determine how the Internet functions as a venue for female public discourse. Internet communication technology has allowed women to enter an open, discursive domain without leaving the physical privacy of their homes or facing the same mechanisms of censorship that control their discourse in the traditional public space. The Internet has thus become an alternate “public space” that is distinct from traditional public space in several important ways. The private nature of content shared by women online, the decreased ability of entrenched patriarchal and governmental systems to regulate such content, and the cross-gender discursive interaction that takes place online makes the Internet a unique space for public discourse and presents unique challenges to Islamic social constructions of private and public space. The effectiveness of this alternate space as a venue for free female self-expression depends on the degree to which a woman’s online and offline identities overlap. When these two identities are not kept separate, a woman’s online discourse becomes constrained by the same forces that control it in traditional public space, suggesting that women’s freedom of self-expression in the public sphere remains quite limited. However, the discursive interaction between men and women online helps construct a common discourse that degenderizes women’s issues and could promote
greater expressive mobility for women. Many questions are unanswered about how women use this space and what the ramifications are for their voices and rights in the future. This thesis explores what is known about the use of this alternate “public space.”
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPACE AND COMMUNICATION</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TECHNOLOGY IN MENA</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEMALE PUBLIC DISCOURSE</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ONLINE COMMUNICATION: AN ALTERNATE PUBLIC SPACE</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

For decades now, the condition of women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has been a hot topic in Middle Eastern studies, and with the passage of time, the need to address women’s issues has only become more apparent. One of the most foundational of these issues is the critical divide between public and private space that characterizes Islamic societies. As these social spheres and their accompanying responsibilities are assigned by gender, this division of roles often acts as an enormous gulf separating women from the economic, political, and social opportunities of the public sphere. Women have been slowly but successfully chipping away at this barrier. However, entry into the physical public space does not necessarily give women the freedom to participate in the public discourse that takes place there. In terms of public discourse, the traditional public sphere remains dominated by the voice of patriarchy (Skalli 38).

Female writers and activists in the MENA have called for nothing short of a transformation of public spaces to allow for open female discourse. Various types of media, such as film, literature, and journalism, as well as public demonstrations have all been boldly utilized by women as discursive tools for that valuable effect. Yet their reach and accessibility as discursive resources for women have been severely limited by the patriarchal system in which they operate. The term patriarchal hierarchy is used to refer to the cultural construct of authority vested in the male members of a family and the society that emerges from rules of patrilineal kinship being assimilated into the civil structure (Bamyeh; Joseph 132). This system entails both the subordination of younger
males to their elder male kin and of women to their male kin (Fargues 47). Because the aforementioned venues for discourse are grounded in the physical public space in the MENA (that is, the market, the street, and state institutions), all are subject to the patriarchal hierarchy that, in the words of Philippe Fargues, “has governed the family system since time immemorial”(47).

The rise of communication technology and the Internet in the MENA offers women a unique opportunity to overcome these barriers. The ease of publishing online, physical separation from the traditional public space, and non-hierarchical structure of the Internet allows women to bypass the entrenched male-dominance of the traditional public space and project female voices to an almost unlimited audience. Furthermore, government efforts to censor and manage the content of Internet communication have proved vulnerable to circumvention. These specific qualities have created an alternative public space distinct from the traditional public space both in content and mechanisms for control over discourse (Skalli 36). Women’s use of the Internet as a means for obtaining information and access to economic opportunities is significant, but this discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, this paper seeks to analyze women’s use of communication technology, specifically the Internet, as a tool for projecting a female public discourse. Three types of online communication, blogs, chat rooms, and Facebook, will be discussed using current literature on women’s use of the Internet as well as several blogs written by women in the MENA.

For this analysis, an understanding of the socio-cultural environment that has long shaped female public discourse is useful. In Islamic societies, women’s exclusion from the public sphere has rested upon conceptions of Islamic governance and family honor.
Private space, represented by the home, is regarded as sacrosanct and should therefore be isolated from crude public scrutiny (Mottahedeh and Stilt 741). A clear separation between private and public space reduces the competition between community or state governing bodies and the authority of a family patriarch within his own home. In this construction, gender is attached to space. The male becomes the public voice and face of the family, while women are viewed as the embodiment of the private. Thus women’s very presence in the public sphere exposes a reality that is not meant for “strange” eyes. In this exposure, the carefully drawn line that protects patriarchal authority in the home from public interference begins to crumble. Avoiding such social anarchy has been an important motivation for Islamic scholars in keeping the public/private divide in tact and governments have often left matters of family and personal status law to the discretion of the clerical community (Lutfi 100; Thompson 62-63). The concept of protecting patriarchal authority is accompanied by the patriarch’s projection of an honorable face to the public sphere in which he and his male relatives are the family’s representatives. Honor is an important type of social capital and relies heavily on the patriarch’s ability to maintain the modesty of the women for whom he is responsible (Weyman). When public female behavior or discourse is deemed socially inappropriate, the entire family’s reputation is damaged. To avoid the risk of losing social capital in this way, one must simply keep the women quiet and secluded.

By creating an alternate public space, communication technology and the Internet reduce the grip of patriarchal control over female discourse. However, women’s use of

---

1 See Deniz Kandiyoti’s “Women, Islam, and the State: A Comparative Approach” for a discussion of patriarchal backlash to state interference in women’s personal status law (237-60).
the Internet as a discursive space is shaped by the limitations inherent to the technology. Literacy, Internet connectivity, access to technology, and computer literacy are significant limitations to this medium. Language skills also have an impact on the Internet’s usefulness as a discursive space. With English as the dominant language of the Internet, proficiency in English is important (though the volume of Arabic websites is on the rise)(Wheeler 159; Leage and Chambers 29). Thus, the body of discourse produced by women online is limited to the young, educated and wealthy. While this reminds us that a significant portion of female discourse is missing, these demographics correspond to those women who, by means of social privilege, have traditionally remained the most secluded and physically cut off from the public sphere. The use of communication technology as an alternate public space has begun to reverse that dynamic.

The discourse projected by women over the Internet depends largely on the type of communicative apparatus being used. Women’s blogs cover a wide variety of topics. Many discuss political issues and events such as resistance movements or elections. Others are deeply personal or explore taboo topics, such as sexuality and drug trade. Still others produce a light-hearted narrative of the author’s every-day activities (Otterman). In all cases, however, women are open and expressive in their discourse and seek to draw attention to what is not commonly known or expressed publicly. The purpose of female

---

2 A large body of anthropological research has shown that in spite of cultural preferences and laws restricting women’s movement in the public sphere, the economic realities of poverty frequently trump the ideal of female seclusion. Fargues notes that “in crisis-hit urban classes, families not uncommonly rely on the wife’s income, prompting husbands to forego standing on their legal rights to restrict the main breadwinner’s movements”(47). On the opposite end of the economic spectrum, elite classes traditionally used seclusion and veiling as a way to protect their status. Thus, actual practices surrounding women’s movement in the public sphere have been more a matter of class than legality (see Thompson 56-57; Fargues 46-47).
participation in chat rooms tends to be somewhat more limited in that the main goal for women is getting to know members of the opposite sex. These characteristics stand in sharp contrast to social networking sites, like Facebook, where most women are cautious about expressing emotion or forming relationships that would be construed as inappropriate in their offline environments (Leage and Chambers 32-33).

Differences in audience help explain these varying levels of self-expression. Blogs often attract a readership that extends beyond political boundaries to regional and international populations. Physically remote from one another, online interaction is often the preliminary if not only social connection between author and audience. Chat rooms are similar in that interaction between women and their audience takes place online before ever extending to offline interaction. Facebook, on the other hand, is primarily designed to create online connections between people who already know each other in offline environments. This site translates into an extension of the traditional public sphere, or rather, a battleground where online and offline identities clash and women must guard their self-expression as carefully as they would in physical public spaces. This danger is compounded by a third audience which is common to both of these communicative mediums: the ever-present, watchful eye of government. All who write online do so with the assurance that the state is carefully monitoring their discourse. Women who use the Internet as a discursive tool are keenly aware of the risks to social and legal standing associated with it (Weyman; Leage and Chambers 34).

The most widely used method of minimizing these risks is anonymity online. The use of pseudonyms is common practice amongst Internet users in MENA, though certainly not the rule (Weyman), and is perhaps the most viable protection for women
against patriarchal and governmental backlash. By creating an alternate identity, anonymity enhances the notion of an alternate public space online that is already distinct from traditional public space in several important ways. First, the content being shared encompasses discourse that is not permissible in the traditional public space. Second, traditional mechanisms for control over discourse, such as censorship and physical force, are less effective. Third, the audience is not bounded by proximity or political boundaries and is cross-gendered and interactive. This discursive interaction between men and women is difficult to sustain in offline environments and allows for the degenderizing of issues that have generally been considered the exclusive concern of one gender or the other (Otterman).

By analyzing women’s use of communication technology, this paper concludes that the greatest danger of online expression for women is presented when these two distinct public spaces collide. The more distance a woman can put between her online and offline identities, the safer she is in both worlds. Here, it behooves us to ask, does the use of communication technology shape society or does society shape the use of communication technology? Because women’s freedom of self-expression online still hinges upon their ability to maintain the separation between alternate and traditional public spaces, society and real-time relationships seem to be the dominant force. Assuming that the ultimate goal for women is easier female integration and empowerment in the physical public space, this does not sound promising. However, the cross-gender interaction that takes place online fosters understanding between the sexes that bleeds into the traditional public space (UNDP 14). Online relationships and discussion often lead to rendezvous in back parking lots and joint activism in the streets.
(Kaya 261, 262; Otterman; Filiu 47). In this way, the links between the alternate and traditional public spaces, while posing the greatest threat to women, are also key to their advancement towards broader discursive freedom.

Another fundamental question in this discussion is to what extent women in MENA seek to push the boundaries of the public/private divide. Do women regard online discourse as a good way of balancing cultural norms that physically segregate gendered spaces with their own aspirations for cross-gender understanding and public expression? Studies interviewing women on the subject provide answers that vary greatly by the individual, but more research is needed on that score. This paper draws upon what is known about women’s use of communication technology as a means for public discourse to suggest possible implications for women’s rights in the future.

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPACE AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY IN THE MENA

In discussing women’s issues in Islamic societies, many scholars stress that describing spaces as either “public” or “private” is too simplistic an approach. Motaheddeh and Stilt argue that the boundary between public and private in traditional Islamic governance was “not rigidly fixed” and that the “relational standing” of individuals to the sphere they attempted to enter was most important in determining where that line falls (736). Kaya suggests something similar when she says that

---

3 In discussing legal interpretations of Islamic governance, Motaheddeh and Stilt note that private individuals, such as neighbors, do not have the right to invade another’s
different spaces are constructed by “different spatial practices, forms of bodily comportment, and conversational limits,” countering the simplistic notion of a clear-cut spatial dichotomy (254, 255). Thompson also points to multiple scholars’ preferences for alternative terminologies and frameworks, such as seclusion and mobility, segregation, and the interplay of modesty and honor (53-54, 57). However, she later notes that the use of such terms as “private” and “public” has become more applicable in analyzing post-colonial women’s issues (58). Furthermore, Kaya’s description of the rigid behavioral constraints governing how men and women share public spaces demonstrates that the ideological attitudes defining public and private space, perhaps in more real terms than physical delineations, are less flexible. Using the case of women in a Jordanian city, she writes:

Though women physically walk in the street of Irbid, their voice and gestures keep them figuratively inside a woman’s realm that winds around and slips through but doesn’t penetrate the polluting public street…. Each for her own part, keeps a careful distance from nearby men. Maintaining proper distances is primarily the responsibility of women, whose reputations would be damaged by improper contact (259, 260).

She goes on to describe how proper Islamic clothing and avoiding eye contact with men on the street are designed to preserve the privacy that women represent, allowing for the coexistence of “two separate realities” in the same street (260).

The traditions surrounding gendered spaces in the MENA are rooted in Islamic ideals and scriptural interpretations, though Islam is not the only influence on social constructions in the MENA. The Prophet Mohammed’s teachings made clear distinctions privacy by spying on them while publicly appointed officials would be granted “a certain degree of discretion” in surveying the activities of an individual’s home (741).
between public and private space where individual modesty was concerned and stressed the sacredness of the home as a private space to which access must be carefully restricted (Stowasser 31; Thompson 54, 57). Qur’anic verses that mention women directly have produced a broad spectrum of interpretation based on “literal, patriarchal, and historical understandings of Shari’a,” many of which are challenged as unnecessarily restrictive and supportive of gender hierarchy (Ali 345). Although these are hotly contested, one such section describing proper behavior in public spaces between men and women resonates closely with Kaya’s description of the Irbidi street:

[Prophet], tell believing men to lower their glances and guard their private parts: that is purer for them. God is aware of everything they do. And tell believing women that they should lower their glances, guard their private parts, and not display their charms beyond what [it is acceptable] to reveal; they should let their headscarves fall to cover their necklines and not reveal their charms except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands’ father, their sons, their husbands’ sons, their brothers, their brothers’ sons, their sisters’ sons, their womenfolk, their slaves, such men as attend them who have no sexual desire, or children who are not yet aware of women’s nakedness; they should not stamp their feet so as to draw attention to any hidden charms. Believers, all of you, turn to God so that you may prosper (verses 24:30-31; trans. Abdul Haleem, Ali 348-349).

The resemblance between these verses and women’s behavior in the streets of Irbid as well as many other areas in the MENA suggests that despite scriptural debate, an interpretation that highlights a strong genderization of space has become entrenched in Islamic societies throughout the MENA. This is not to say that the relationship between gender and space in MENA societies has not evolved since the years of the Prophet, nor is it to say that Islam is the most important contributor to gendered social constructions. Identifying which aspects of “Islamic societies” are based on valid interpretations of
Islamic law and which are the product of culture and custom is a significant challenge for scholars and Muslims alike, and one that is emphasized particularly by Islamic feminists (Ali 340; Moruzzi, and Sadeghi 24). Many have argued that the fusion of Islamic principles and cultural constructs over centuries of interpretation and practice has translated into a dominant male discourse that remains largely intact, despite the social impact of such powerful forces as modernization (Thompson 53-55; Skalli 38; Sadat 131). In the case of Iran, for example, Norma Claire Moruzzi and Fatemeh Sadeghi write that “contemporary Iranian society combines ‘liberated’ attitudes toward social freedom with masculinist conceptions of social morality, under the watchful gaze of a patriarchal Islamist state” (28).

The relationship between state, Islam, and patriarchal systems in the MENA has typically been one of competition. As described above, male-dominated interpretations of Islam that link patriarchal authority with Islamic practice have often stood in opposition to the secularizing interference of the state. In Islamic terms, this may be based on the rejection of public interference in the home as a defilement of private spaces. In patriarchal terms, it is based on the rejection of public interference as competing with male authority in the home. Women’s activists recognize this competition and thus often appeal to the state for assistance in changing women’s legal status.4 Naomi Sakr describes the push and pull between state and patriarchy, observing that “the retreat of the state leaves women more vulnerable … to dependence on patriarchal families.” Because of this, she argues that state attention to women’s rights is

---

4 Fighting to change discriminatory laws against women has been a major battle across the MENA region. Many activists have employed Internet-based communication to gain local and international support for their campaigns (see Rahimi and Gheytanchi 53-56;
an important means “to remove [the] structural basis of gender inequality by making
[women’s issues] a public, not a private, issue.” She further contends that state
involvement is the most effective way of achieving “lasting structural improvements in
women’s situation”(156). However, the long history of states ceding decision-making
authority over family and personal status law to the clerical community in an effort to
appease Islamists has rendered states in the MENA generally unresponsive to feminist
activism (Thomson 62-63). Women’s movements for legal reform have become more
organized in furthering women’s participation in public spaces, but such efforts face
strong opposition and successes are often short-lived (Skalli 38; Sadat 145-149).
Thompson points out that the alliances between states and clerical communities in these
legal areas have “compromised women’s citizenship rights” and “promoted a new [post-
colonial] rigidity in legal definitions of gender boundaries”(63).

In addition to legal constraints, female participation in the public sphere is also an
issue of honor. A family’s honor, evidenced by the modesty of its women, is an
important social force in preserving the divide between genderized spaces. Female
modesty, both in appearance and behavior, translates into a type of social capital for all
members of the family (Weyman; Kaya 269). When women fail to adhere to social
norms of propriety, they place the honor of the entire family in jeopardy. One such
behavior that can jeopardize a family’s honor is the projection of the voice of its female
members into public space.5

5 Kaya notes that in the MENA, “most social relationships are integrated into an
individual’s kin-based social network” and family members are expected to share in each
other’s social connections. Thus, when one individual engages in inappropriate public
behavior, the reputations of her family members may be damaged by association and all
lose social capital (269).
Previous methods of projecting female discourse into the public sphere (or what Skalli simply calls “old” communication technologies) include the use of film, literature, journalism, and broadcast media. In all of these forms, women have found means for expressive freedom to varying degrees (see Skalli 39-52; Ayish 194-99; Cooke 23-24). The effect of women’s writing has been to “interpret reality in ways that contradict, correct, and even discredit reductionist dominant male discourses”(Skalli 40). Because of this, formal publication to print literature has been an enormous challenge to most women in the MENA, even for those with considerable financial and social means. The patriarchal hierarchy that characterizes family, market, and state institutions in the MENA, as well as authoritarian governments, has made traditional means of public discourse difficult for women to access and utilize. Several publishing companies have been established by women and for women to alleviate some of these constraints, and the number of women working in the media industry has been increasing (Skalli 44; Ayish 203). However, women “continue to be victimized by negative social and cultural attitudes and prejudiced institutional practices” which inhibit their ability to “freely articulate their identities in public space”(Ayish 203, 192). When female discourse does manage publication, it often remains “hidden in a system that carefully control[s] the distribution of culture both inside and outside of the country” (Cooke 26).

The introduction of the Internet as a tool for discourse has transformed the landscape for women’s writing by removing many of the barriers that women have faced in projecting their voice into public space. First, online publication is quick, easy, and does not require significant financial or network capital. The explosive increase in the number of blogs since 2004 in Egypt alone demonstrates the convenience of using this
medium. Second, the global reach of the Internet allows for discourse to be projected beyond political or geographic boundaries, expanding the pool of potential readership and support that women can gain (Yousef 94). This communicative medium does not come without significant limitations, however. As of 2010, the average literacy rate among young women in the MENA between the ages of 15 and 24 was 87 percent, and the number of Internet users ranged from 4 percent in Afghanistan to 78 percent in the United Arab Emirates (“State of the World’s Children”). Access to technology, computer literacy, and the ability to read and write in English or Arabic continue to put the Internet beyond the reach of many women (Wheeler 159). However, the proliferation of Internet cafés that offer both access and training for computer use as well as increasing computer ownership make the Internet a viable venue for discourse for significant numbers of women (Wheeler 161; Filiu 45-46).

**FEMALE PUBLIC DISCOURSE**

Because of the traditional conceptions of private space as a female realm, feminine discourse is often regarded as articulating “what society seeks to overlook, silence, or forget in public” (Skalli 41). Before evaluating the content of women’s discourse, a look at who is in fact speaking on the Internet is needed.

Online female discourse in the MENA is the product of middle, upper-middle, and upper class women under the age of thirty (Otterman). Data suggest that once the barriers to Internet access are overcome, women’s online activity is substantial. A survey

---

6 Between 2004 and 2007, the number of blogs in Egypt rose from 100 to approximately 3,000 (Otterman).
conducted by YouGov in 2010 revealed that 34 percent of female Internet users in the MENA spend at least ten hours a week online (excluding work-based activities and emailing). Percentages by country of women who spend seven hours or more per week are presented in Figure 1.

The survey included using the Internet to access information and read digital articles and magazines, but also illuminated how women use it as a discursive space. Of the women surveyed, 66 percent connected with friends on a daily basis, 71 percent belonged to a social network, and 37 percent were active on social networking sites, blogs, and forums.

![Figure 1. YouGov survey conducted in 2010 of women's Internet habits in the MENA shows that once connected to the Internet, women spend a substantial amount of time using it (Arabia 2000).](image)
Most significantly in terms of the public/private divide, the survey showed that 83 percent of female Internet users in the MENA access it from home (*Arabia 2000*). Coupled with the number of women participating in blogs, forums, and social networking sites and the amount of time they spend online, these data indicate that online communication technologies are a significant means of public discourse for women.

How women use the Internet as a discursive outlet differs from one individual to another, but can generally be related to the type of communication technology they are using. Blogs, chat rooms, and social networking sites serve different purposes, reach different audiences, and thus differ in the level of self-expression and types of material discussed. To demonstrate this, let us look at these three different types individually.

In the blogosphere, subject matter for posts and discussions varies widely from one blog to another. Discussing anything from political issues and events to taboo topics like sexuality and drug use to personal narratives, these cheap and easy-to-run websites project a broad spectrum of female expression. One example of a politically oriented blog is “Egyptian Chronicles” by Zeinobia, a Cairene who introduces herself as “just [an] Egyptian girl who lives in the present with the glories of the past and hopes in a better future for herself and for her country.” Publishing information and commentary on any political developments she deems newsworthy, titles of her posts from early 2012 include “The Final List of Constituent Assemblies,” “Egyptian Elections: Wacky Races Indeed,” and “Who is the Real Supreme Guide of [the] Muslim Brotherhood?” When she does divert from a stream of “Egyptian Election 2012” posts to discuss animal cruelty and oil spills, she explains it as still just “speaking about everything I consider to be wrong with this country.”
The blog “Egypt – The Reality” by Isis is an example of women discussing taboo topics. Isis focuses on her experience as a recovering heroin addict and posts information about drug markets and culture in Egypt as well as rehabilitation (Otterman). Some of her posts are deeply personal and express feelings and sensations that many addicts or recovering addicts might recognize. In a post titled “The Craving,” Isis described her latest craving after having been clean for four years:

For a about two weeks now, flashbacks, dreams, even a little hallucination where I see a combination of images and memories of things that happened, and things that didn’t. I see blood filled syringes, I see people from the past, some of them dead and others alive. (sic)

She goes on to relate how her boyfriend, presumably one of the subjects of her flashbacks, introduced her to heroin at age seventeen (after she had already been using other drugs), then line-items the triggers for the craving and some suggestions for how to avoid relapses. Some of her personal narratives take on a political tone as she discusses corruption and drug use in the police force (Otterman).

Blogs like “Nermeena” and “Two Pairs of Eyes” also discuss personal topics but with less of a prescribed agenda. The authors of both focus on sharing their thoughts and feelings about their day-to-day lives as well as personal tastes and interests. Nermeena, a single Cairene woman in her thirties with a dream of opening her own bookstore, has been blogging since early 2005. Lighthearted yet contemplative – the blog’s subtitle is “Blogs from Cairo with Love. May You Enter Favored and Leave Beloved” – she posts inspiring quotes, lyrics to her favorite songs, and pictures that express her feelings about life on a given day. When her thoughts turn to women’s issues, her writing draws upon her personal experiences and emotions:
In our family parents like to see their daughters happy in a house not in a
den… You would hear my mom go like “why cage?? A home is a place
where you feel at ease, where you feel peaceful and comfortable not
suffocated”. A couple years ago my dad told me “the only reason you
would leave this house for another one is because you want to not because
you have to”. Bottom line, they both encourage the idea of marrying for
the right reasons rather than acquiring a social status….

Believe me, a single woman over thirty is constantly praying for someone
“who feels like home” to her, she merrily goes out window shopping with
her friends and the time she glances a tiny pink baby shoe her heart
clinches, she cries tearlessly. She craves a white dress, an intimate waltz,
and a warm hand to wrap hers. Yet deep inside she knows it is something
that might or might not happen to her, nothing is guaranteed. She knows
that God have granted her many blessing and she counts them contentedly,
she knows she might not get this one for a reason, but she has been given
hundreds in return (“from My Violet Diary”). (sic)

Similarly, Maat and Nephthys in their shared blog “Two Pairs of Eyes” use their
every-day experiences to construct their posts. Maat’s posts about marriage, however,
paint a significantly different picture of familial relationships and expectations from that
of Nermeena’s. Full of frustration, Maat asks for people (her family, though not
explicitly mentioned) to stop setting her up with “good guys,” and challenges the
traditional notion that marriage should be the priority for women. She asks why she can’t
have other ambitions first and declares that should she marry, she does not want a
wedding because the guests would be friends and associates of her father but strangers to
her (Weyman). Nephthys also challenges social norms by criticizing public displays of
religiosity as shallow, simply putting on a show of piety to gain social points. She then
situates herself as genuinely religious without having to draw attention to it through
outward demonstrations. Both of these women cut right to the fabric of Egyptian society.

---

7 The data on Maat and Nephthys’s blog posts are drawn from George Weyman’s work
on personal blogs in Egypt.
as they see issues arise in their personal lives. However, in his analysis of this blog, Weyman argues that these posts in Maat and Nephthys’s discourses should not be considered a rejection of Egyptian-Islamic values (a point underscored by the fact that neither of these women are seen outside their homes without the hijab). Rather, these posts should be interpreted as a reformulation of those values, a proposition for greater individual space to make personal decisions (Weyman).

While blogs are generally used to express any variety of thoughts, feelings, or agendas, the purpose of online chatting is generally more narrow: to interact with members of the opposite sex. Kaya presents a thorough analysis of women’s use of chat rooms in Irbid, Jordan. While women have female friends online, chatting with male friends in chat rooms is the primary focus (Kaya 253). These conversations are often flirtatious and regarded as a useful way to prepare for a marriage relationship by reducing “the mysteries and ‘otherness’ of the opposite sex” (Wheeler 153; Kaya 266). Notably absent is the exchange of family names or genealogical information that might allow individuals to discover familial connections. Personal identification is typically limited to name, sex, and country of residence (Kaya 271).

Women’s use of Facebook differs significantly from their use of chat rooms and, most pronouncedly, from blogs. A study conducted at Northwestern University-Qatar interviewed 42 female university students between the ages of 18 and 22, all of whom were single and lived with their parents. In their introduction to the study, Rodda Leage and Ivana Chalmers wrote that many of the women described Facebook as “a place to communicate, and not a place to express their identity” (27). While several of the

---

8 Before 2004 when blogs became widespread in the MENA, chat rooms were relied upon as a venue for personal expression and sharing opinions (al-Roomi 141).
participants did not use Facebook, those who did were generally rather cautious about the degree of emotion they expressed on the site. This was based on both a fear that their expressions might be misunderstood and a feeling that the expression of strong emotion in public was inappropriate (33-34). Some women, Leage and Chalmers noted, turned to more creative methods of using Facebook to avoid these issues:

One example was a friend of an interviewee who used the ‘Notes’ feature as a journal, which she shared with selected friends. The interviewee perceived it as a way that her friend could express her emotions and concerns on Facebook and shares them with selected friends, choosing who had access to her Notes and who did not. Restricting access was a method used by many girls and became more frequent as a girl attempted broader self-expression (35).

This observation points to a key aspect of communication on the Internet that in many ways determines the nature of online female discourse: audience. Who has access and who is likely to access the discourse that women project is different for each of these three communicative mediums.

In the blogosphere, readership ranges anywhere from local to regional to international. Like blog posts themselves, comments by readers are written in English, Arabic, and Anglo-Arabic (a transliteration of Arabic using the Latin alphabet), and come from all over the world from both genders (Weyman; Yousef 94; Otterman). The blog Baghdad Burning, written by a 25-year-old Iraqi woman on post-Second Gulf War conditions in Iraq, received such wide international readership that it was formally published in 2005 and followed by a sequel in 2006 (Cooke 24). Blogs appeal more to like-minded individuals than to groups of people with geographical or ethnic ties (al-Roomi 141). This allows them to attract an audience from anywhere in the world, but at
the same time, promotes an in-group mentality where dissenting voices are sometimes unwelcome (see discussion below). Women in chat rooms communicate one-on-one with other individuals in the chat room. Thus the audience for any conversation is usually just one other person, and most importantly, someone they don’t know in their offline environments. For the most part, women chat with friends who reside in the same country as they do, but they are careful to avoid chatting with men whom they or their family members already know offline. This is meant to preserve the freedom to construct relationships with as little commitment or concern over personal or familial reputation as possible (Kaya 268-74). One Kuwaiti woman interviewed by Wheeler in 2004, noted that because men and women chatting online don’t know each other, “they feel safer to voice their concerns, ideas, etc. without having their reputations ruined or without it affecting their social life”(Wheeler 152-53). The audience for Facebook users, however, is quite different. Although it is not technically bounded by political or geographical lines, most of a woman’s Facebook “friends” come first from her offline social connections. Because of this, the women in the NU-Qatar study felt their Facebook profiles were scrutinized by others in the same manner their offline public behavior would be. They limited the number of male “friends” they had and heavily self-censored their own discourse in order to preserve both their individual and familial respectability (Leage and Chalmers 28-34, 40). Thus we see that the relational standing between women writing online and their expected audience members heavily impacts the type of information they share and the freedom with which they express themselves.
ONLINE COMMUNICATION: AN ALTERNATE PUBLIC SPACE

The specific qualities of the Internet as a discursive tool combine to create an alternate public space. This space presents unique possibilities for women in the MENA primarily because, while it often works parallel to activities in the physical public space, it is not bounded by the same parameters. First, as made evident by prior discussion of female online discourse, the content of the alternate public space is fundamentally different from that of the traditional public space. From a general viewpoint, this is simply because the discourse is female and unabashedly so. The work of Milani and other scholars on women’s use of traditional venues for public discourse indicate that women have often “adapted their voices to the public realm of lectures, publishing, theater, and song,” and have “employed various strategies to confront the shamefulness of publicity, such as adopting rhetorical veils, desexualizing their vocabulary, and addressing classical and religious themes” (Thompson 64). Female public discourse online appears to be less subject to such self-censorship, but women who use it openly often express discomfort with projecting the discourse they share online into their offline environments (Weyman; Leage and Chalmers 33; Weyman). Skalli helps explain why this occurs:

In most MENA countries, access to the public sphere does not necessarily translate into gender equality or women’s achievement of their politico-economic and legal rights. True, the number of women in schools, private and public sectors of activities, political structures, and decision-making positions is slowly on the rise. However, the significance of these numbers is threatened by the vigilant eye of the political regime and Islamist groups and very often negated by conservative family laws
institutionalizing discrimination. Thus, while the sources of resistance remain numerous, women are forced to be more strategic in their interventions and creative in their actions and alliances if they want to transform their realities in a meaningful way (39).

Though her explanation of the forces that restrict women’s behavior in the public sphere is somewhat simplistic, Skalli aptly points out that while some women may occupy the same physical ground as men, they are not on equal ground. Simply entering the physical public space through careers, educational institutions, or government institutions does not create the transformation in gender relations that women are seeking. This is because the traditional public space is constructed as a non-level playing field. The significance of the Internet as an alternate public space is that it allows for a type of public female expression on an apparatus free of the hierarchical systems entrenched in traditional public space.

Weyman notes, however, that blogs tend to form in-group communities that are not without a hierarchical structure of their own. By being the only participants able to delete posts or comments, the owners of a blog have a degree of control over the discourse published on it. This exclusive right to censorship puts them in a position of power within their blog’s community where “disciplinary action” is both the prerogative and the responsibility of the owner. Consider the following example from Nermeena’s blog. In the thread of comments following a post that lamented unkindness as the seemingly only way to gain respect, one reader’s responses rationalized the phenomenon in a somewhat unscrupulous and unsympathetic manner. Nermeena made no issue of it at first, but as the harsh comments continued, she posted this response:
Archangel: for a reason I think I’ve seen ur nickname somewhere bas I can’t remember where. For another reason ba2a I don’t really like your tone…mesh mesteraya7a, maybe it is the sarcastic endings for ur comments!!! (sic)

In the end, Archangel, the provocateur, apologized for causing any offense and expressed appreciation to the blog’s participants. Nermeena closed the exchange by graciously accepting the apology (“Sporadic Notes”). In this situation, Nermeena used her position as the blog’s owner to protect the discursive tone she wished to maintain on her blog, first by placing Archangel in the position of outsider and second, by challenging the nature of his discourse directly. As the “host” for the discourse, Nermeena had the authority and felt the responsibility to intervene in this way. The in-group mentality described by Weyman also places limitations on the type of discourse shared on a blog as the blog’s regular followers defend their group ideology from the comments of dissident intruders.9

While the Internet may not be the embodiment of Utopian egalitarianism, it presents a certain type of equality in that it allows any connected individual to assume a position of power and to select the community to which she wishes to connect herself. Weyman’s analysis of blog culture shows that not all types of discourse are accepted by everyone online, but participants have the option of searching out or creating a new space for themselves where their discourse will be accepted (or, at the very least, tolerated). For women, the possibility of power redistribution through this public discourse is

9 In “Two Pairs of Eyes,” Maat wrote a post complaining about how a young man had sent his mother to Maat’s house to determine whether she would be suitable as a prospective bride. Though a very traditional method of bride searching, Maat was extremely uncomfortable and felt she was being treated as an “object.” In the thread of comments of support that followed, an anonymous male blogger came to the young man’s defense. While Maat responded diplomatically, her peer bloggers criticized the anonymous male blogger’s comments and defended Maat’s position. Weyman describes this as defending their “patch” of ground.
particularly efficacious because of the traditional hierarchies that have for so long
disenfranchised women in the public sphere (Thompson 65). Additionally, the freedom
to choose which discursive communities to join enables women to shape their own
system of norms and values as a virtual replacement to the social constructs of their
offline environments.

In addition to bypassing many of the social constraints on female discourse, the
Internet offers individuals new opportunities to circumvent government controls over
discourse. The unconventional nature of the Internet as a tool of interaction,
mobilization, and information proliferation has made conventional methods of
government control increasingly less effective and authoritarian governments have
struggled to adapt their typical control strategies to this new communicative medium
(Rahimi and Gheytanchi 46). Thus far, their methods have involved blocking websites or
strong-arming Internet service providers (ISPs) into no longer hosting particular sites, as
well as using the Internet to proliferate their own discourse to the public (Seib 6). These
efforts have failed to silence dissent as Internet users are quick to find new ways to
circumvent such barriers, such as using anti-filtering programs, and even retaliate by
hacking into and dismantling government websites (Rahimi and Gheytanchi 51, 53;
Wheeler 156; al-Roomi 142; Filiu 50). However, there is a very clear danger associated
with blogging, and bloggers know they take considerable risk in voicing their opinions
online. When states are able to identify bloggers posting anti-government content, those
individuals have been arrested, interrogated, or beaten in states across the MENA,
including Iran, Egypt, Bahrain, Morocco, Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi
Arabia (Lynch; Economist). Charges range from spying to spreading false information to
criticizing religious clerics and the government, but since activism online and in the physical public space tend to go hand in hand, it is unclear whether these bloggers were arrested for offline activism or exclusively for the content of their blogs. However, some cases suggest the latter (Economist; Otterman). To increase the state’s ability to identify bloggers and thus impose physical contraints, governments have drafted legislation requiring bloggers to register (Birke; Economist). While there is little that can be done against this tactic, these arrests elicit strong responses from the blogging community, publicizing the arrest of fellow bloggers and calling for their release (Mana). In 2010, online protests in Jordan even prompted the government to drop some of the more repressive elements of proposed legislation fighting cyber crimes (Economist).

A third aspect of the alternate space of online communication that differentiates it from traditional spaces is the cross-gendered interaction that takes place there. In blogs and chat rooms, men and women engage with each other to a degree not typically found in traditional public space. Kaya’s description of men and women in the streets of Irbid, Jordan properly avoiding eye contact and “[gliding] by each other, enclosed within… two separate realities coexisting on one street”(260) falls apart in the online public space (Wheeler 152). As she later notes when discussing chat rooms, the exchange of the written word between men and women is often viewed with less concern because it does not involve a man seeing, touching, or hearing a woman (264). Thus, “the actual practice of [communicating] on the internet… is usually understood to be less morally problematic for unmarried women than even the briefest, most public meeting with an unrelated man”(Kaya 264).
The effect of this discursive exchange on the Internet has been to degenderize topics generally regarded as “women’s issues” and allow for the formulation of a common discourse (Otterm). The explosion of blogging activity that publicized a wave of sexual harassment in Cairo during Eid celebrations in October of 2006 is a good example of this. Both male and female bloggers posted videos and first-hand accounts of what they saw or experienced on the streets, fueling heated cross-gendered debates and discussions. In an interview with Sharon Otterm in early 2007, Sandmonkey, a popular anonymous male blogger, remarked that after the Eid attacks, sexual harassment became a “male-female issue… in a society that often excuses male behavior as a result of their nature and their frustration with life, and relies on women to control and restrain society.” This allowed the issue to gain “traction” even in the traditional public sphere. The potential of cross-gendered discourse on the Internet to improve women’s conditions within the traditional public sphere is also acknowledged by women who cite chatting online as a useful tool for getting to know the opposite sex in preparation for marriage (Wheeler 153). Kaya also suggests that Internet cafés themselves are a unique public space where online and off-line interactions between men and women overlap in a way that promotes physical social interaction and the breakdown of some social constraints. However, this very fact sometimes decreases the respectability of going to Internet cafes and discourages women from doing so. Women who do go prefer locations that are not easily observed from the street (Kaya 263-64, 273).

The issue of respectability as well as the use of arrests as a means of controlling discourse points to the uncomfortable relationship between the alternate and traditional public spaces. This relationship is particularly thorny for women since, unlike men, they
must be especially sensitive to the social implications of what they say. The study conducted by Northwestern University at Qatar revealed that many women felt anxiety over how their Facebook profiles would be scrutinized by family members and friends and concluded that Facebook “wasn’t generally seen as a safe place for self-expression” (Leage, and Chalmers 33). One woman interviewed in the study remarked, “It’s like a double identity where within yourself you might be thinking things are right, but unfortunately your culture does not think it’s right” (Leage, and Chalmers 34).

Another interview expressed a sentiment that many women in the study shared: one woman “believe[d] that she must manage the content on both her site and to some extent her friends’ sites in order to guarantee that she is presented properly.” Leage and Chalmers continued:

> While many people would claim to have similar concerns on [social networking sites], the vigilance that girls like [this interviewee] must keep is much more demanding. While Facebook allows her a certain amount of self-expression she must constantly manage that ‘freedom,’ begging the question of whether or not the payoff is actually worth it (36).

Anonymity has thus become an important way for bloggers, chatters, and members of social networking sites to minimize the risks associated with open self-expression. Kaya describes women’s online anonymity as presenting “identities which are exclusive both of the more ‘public’ identities which they put forward on the streets… and of the ‘private’ identities which they claim at home and among friends” (254). The distinction from even their private identities is evident in the case of Maat and Nephthys, neither of whom felt they could tell their parents about their shared blog. This may be explained by the patriarchal hierarchy that governs familial interaction. Maat would openly express
her thoughts and feelings about marriage and family relationships online, but would not confront her father directly with those thoughts and feelings because she knew that ultimately, he still “conveys the authority in her life” (Weyman). Additionally, while openly expressive on their blog, Maat and Nephthys are very careful to keep the blog unknown to their associations on Facebook. Since Facebook functions primarily as a means of connecting people online with their offline associations and is not as conducive to maintaining anonymity, it is clear that the closer an online communicative medium corresponds to a woman’s offline environment, the less she is able to express herself online without fear of tangible (either social or physical) repercussions.

CONCLUSION

The transformative impact of communication technology on social constructions of public and private in the MENA is in its ability to circumvent traditional barriers to project the female voice. But is this considered an acceptable expressive outlet for women in MENA? It is true that women can and do engage in this public discourse without leaving the “sacrosanct” confines of the home. But in traditional Islamic societies, the projection of inappropriate behavior even from inside the home out into the public (such as the noises of music or drunkenness) could warrant disciplinary action (Motaheddeh, and Stilt 738). Could this apply to the digital female voice? Women’s hesitation to express themselves openly on Facebook and the dangers associated with overt self-expression online suggest this could be true.
In an environment of such heavy social constraints, women’s use of communication technology has led to the creation of an alternate public space, complete with what is often very literally an alternate identity. The clashing point of these competing public spheres is a veritable “No Woman’s Land.” Women caught in the crossfire suffer severe consequences of reputation damage and even, at the most extreme level, death at the hands of a family member (Leage, and Chalmers 29). It becomes clear, then, that so long as the traditional public sphere continues to be hostile towards a female discursive presence, the use of communication technology to project the female voice remains a stony path.

Yet the outlook for change in the traditional public sphere is promising. In its 2005 report, just one year after blogging became a significant tool for female discourse in the MENA, the Arab Human Development reported:

These media forms have facilitated a new discourse of liberation by enabling women to occupy public spaces that they could not have entered through the use of written material and newspapers alone. They have helped to promote gender awareness oriented towards social cohesion, equality and the principle of equity as the appropriate alternatives to discrimination between the sexes (14).

The “gender awareness” promoted by cross-gender interaction online is perhaps the most important factor in the Internet’s capacity to further women’s equal access to traditional public space in the MENA. Wheeler’s analysis of women’s use of the Internet in 2004 includes several interviews with women where they showed optimism about how communication with men online could benefit them in their offline environments. One Saudi Arabian woman expressed this sentiment:
I think that interaction between the sexes especially in the workplace is inevitable in the future, and I think that the Internet may be the only means to proving that decent and respectable interaction is possible. Hopefully the good will overcome the evil that is spread online, and people can see that the glass is really half full (156).

Limited readership of women’s blogs may dull the grand-scale societal transformations that are possible with this technology. However, Marc Lynch argues that the relatively small volume of blogs and the audience they attract does not diminish the technology’s value as a tool for social change. “If blogs cannot constitute a genuine public sphere without reaching a mass audience,” he writes, “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” (5).

Answering questions about the Internet’s potential to benefit women requires a sensitive approach to what women in the MENA actually want for themselves. In a survey conducted for the 2003 Arab Human Development Report, Arabs were asked to express their attitudes towards governance, education, and gender equality. In what Skalli terms a “schizophrenic position,” Arabs demonstrated support for gender equality in education, but balked when it came to women’s formal access to the public sphere (Skalli 38). Certainly there is a degree of inconsistency in these responses. However, scholars are increasingly recognizing the disparity between Western feminist sensibilities and the feminisms to which women in Islamic societies relate. Fadwa el Guindi points out that the feminism born out of the Western experience and often applied to the MENA “prioritizes women’s problems, mostly independent of cultural constructions, and often segregated from society as a whole and from political affairs” (68). Based on this
definition, Skalli’s description of such concurrent values as “schizophrenic” suggests a Western feminist approach to the subject. Guindi goes on to say that:

Approaching Muslim women’s rights through liberal feminist agendas cannot be effective because these agendas are based on the Western experience and derive from Western values; hence they are irrelevant to most issues of concern to Muslim women… To be effective, these issues must be dealt with within the same framework that created them (69).

This distinction between Western and Middle Eastern feminisms is important in evaluating the impact of communication technology on women’s lives. What are MENA women hoping to gain by using communication technology? Do they view it as a fulfilling outlet for self-expression, or simply a steppingstone towards the larger goal of integration in the physical public space? Answers to these questions vary by individual and more research needs to be done in this area. Thus far, women have expressed feelings of greater freedom in most online environments, but at the bottom of her blog, Isis makes this telling statement: “War for freedom does not take place on screens but is fought on streets.”
WORKS CITED


Fargues, Phillippe. “Women in Arab Countries: Challenging the Patriarchal System.”


<http://egyptreality.blogspot.com/>


Lutfi, Huda. "Manners and Customs of Fourteenth-Century Cairene Women: Female


Zeinobia. “They Kill Cats at Gezira Club!!” *Egyptian Chronicles: Egypt That You Don't

<www.egyptianchronicles/blogspot.com>
Name of Candidate: Megan Miller
Birth date: September 10, 1989
Birth place: Los Angeles, California
Address: 4884 Viewmont Street
Holladay, UT 84117