Culture, Lifestyle and the Information Revolution in the Middle East and Muslim World

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Abstract

For over two decades, the 'information revolution' in the Middle East has been framed overwhelmingly in terms of media, more of it, and in comparisons to mass media – from the advent of any-to-any communication to ad hoc conceptualizations such as 'crowd-sourcing' or 'citizen journalism' – that register the multiplication of voices, channels and eroding boundaries in spheres of communication. The record has expanded more than conceptualizations of its sociologies in media and communications studies. It's time for other questions that elicit additional and more basic features of Internet practices from choices that shape individual repertoires and participation to continuities between users and producers to how actual practices scale up, which actually link micro and macro processes. To elicit these broader sociologies, and move beyond the limited social physics of 'impact' of the Internet on culture and lifestyles, I draw on the related sociologies of reference group and network theory, on Science-Technology-Society studies and sociolinguistics to bring disruption of existing institutions, on the one hand, and cooptation by them, on the other, into more unified theory of the play of information revolution in culture and lifestyles on the Internet.

Keywords: culture; lifestyle; information revolution; Middle East

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Introduction

As Information Revolution, as Cyberspace, or what I prefer to think of as the social life of the Internet including social life on it, the multiple ways we can think of the Internet attest to a protean character that animates forms of public participation and individual formation or sometimes in terms of culture and lifestyle. Overwhelmingly, it has been assessed in the Middle East through the lens of media studies and theories of communication supporting them that emphasize message and medium over all other features of communication (from formal ones of genre and voice to interactional ones of relations between speaker and hearer). This takes too narrow a view not just of Internet sociology, but also of the Internet itself. Common to such views have been assumptions that social life on the Internet is determined by the social life of it, which I believe is an artifact of the overwhelming emphasis on examinations of it in the Middle East as media and as 'new' that overlook its history and development, both generally and in the region. The outcome is an analytically isolated Internet, ever 'new' as alternative space, and sociologically impoverished by that isolation. I will argue that there is a richer and in some ways more normal sociology to be had by looking beyond its development and registers as a communications tool to features and settings of communication in addition to message-passing and medium effects that problematize its dual spacization as at once discontinuous, and discontinuous with its contexts.

Continuous, Discontinuous, Social or Technological?

To a considerable extent, the question has been how it is continuous or discontinuous, with answers partly a function of what point in the process is analytically engaged. It is almost universally the case that encounters with Internet technologies when they are new emphasize discontinuities, which refract programmatic interests of developers and the sociology they attempt to design into information technologies (or, as their engineers tend to think of them as 'machines' or lately 'engines'). Continuities tend to come as identifications with specific social interests and localized practices – from the work habits and values of engineers in the original scientific internet to the publication turn of the initial World Wide Web to the interactive 'networking' of today's Social Media.

Here, attention is drawn first to how Internet sites and models of culture and lifestyles are new, which the Internet certainly is. Invented in 1969 by communications engineers and computer scientists for their own work and developed for two decades in research labs and universities it served, the Internet went public in the early 1990s with the World Wide Web and a decade later began absorbing wider swaths of social life into proliferating Social Media. But what is new to first users hardly seems so subsequent ones who encounter both socializing agents and an Internet that is itself more socialized, or already part of life.

Social Networking Sites, like MUDs and Usenet groups before them, are known to afford discursive opportunities for the re-engineering of the self in ways that adapt to post-structuralist frameworks for thinking about identity. While Social Networking Sites appear to have exploded into cyberspace in a very short time following the introduction of MySpace (2003), Facebook (2004) and Bebo (2005), there is a longer history to the development of applications that were utilized in the most popular Social Networking Sites. Profiles had been a feature of early dating sites, and instant messaging and chat applications also offered the possibility of creating 'buddy lists'. The first Social Networking Site is said to had been introduced as early as 1997 with SixDegrees.com which failed to take off in the manner of its later imitators (Lister et al., 2009, p. 215-216). Their defining feature is –as the name connotes- to make exchanges on the World Wide Web more broadly social, which was made explicit with the advent of Web 2.0 technologies that gave new, broader, use of the Internet as a site of explicitly social interaction.

If I have learned anything in studying proliferation of Internet technologies throughout the Middle East and Islamic world for twenty years, it is that all new media of communication pass through trajectories of encompassing more forms of life and culture, driving and driven by new users and new uses. While new users must become socialized to whatever iteration they meet, and in the beginning its agents are prominently devoted to that, in time and with more users, Internet media come to resemble more of the societies they are in. Their sociology becomes more normal and they, phenomenologically or in experience, more 'natural' or in the jargon of the trade, 'user-friendly.' Stochastic absorption

of cultures and lifestyles into the Internet make duality seem a feature of the margins, of the beginnings and edges of things where, arguably, the social life of the Internet (its agencies) dominates social life on the Internet that is reversed over time as it becomes more user-friendly (to more diverse users). So stated, this seems banal; but social scientists are drawn professionally to such margins, or in the case of the Internet where it first and most visibly makes a difference. When diverse sorts of new media were appearing across the Muslin World in the 1990s, Dale Eickelman and I linked them to new interpreters and new interpretations of religion composing, both on purpose and in practice, an emerging public sphere (Eickelman & Anderson, 2003). We intended this less as a positive theory – directionality wasn't clear but was clearly diverse – than as a useful formula for pulling together multiple variables, and that is what it seems to have been for many subsequently who have taken it as a first approximation, variously critiqued it, and generated massive amounts of data as the phenomena themselves have grown and – I would say – outgrown the capacity of our first approximation.

Taking only the Internet, virtually the entire Islamic world is now on-line; something approximating its empirical diversity, previously of interest mostly to scholars, is on display on the Internet. Not every Muslim in every village, of course; but by some estimates nearly one in ten Internet users is Muslim, and more than one in ten Muslims uses the Internet. Institutionally, nearly every major and many minor madrassa have online presences, representatives of every madhab and Sufi tariqa, principal 'ulema and shuyukh', movements of all stripe as well as conventional da'wa and many individual contributions offer everything from religious instruction, lessons for children and religious advice to more psychological advice, information, news and views of world events in Islamic frames, and commonly in the vernacular.[1] And this is not all that animates Muslims using the Internet. There is work, leisure, education and myriad other forms of self-fashioning and cultural witness.

For this, we need a more discriminating sociology than the over-determining emphasis on the Internet in the Middle East

[1] See, for example, the assiduous chronicling by Gary Bunt (Bunt, 2000, 2003, 2009) with continuous updates on his website, http://garybunt.wix.com/virtuallyislamic.

as media. As media it is most accessible to observers, who are themselves online and primarily observing online; but media are not the best lens on the Internet – and for at least two reasons. First, media are in practice a narrow slice of life and a limited domain of culture, however central they become for articulating the mass culture of mass society. But their importance can be overemphasized in emphasizing what distinguishes those societies and in common first comparisons of Internet media as selective or alternative to mass media. It is certainly selective to view culture and lifestyle through such a lens and fail to register other activities on and uses of the Internet.

They also fail because reference concepts of mass media have been cast in narrow theories of communication that focus on messages that affect recipients' knowledge, attitudes and practices, and to a lesser extent channel effects that absorb recipients' attention. These paradigms reduce communication, and thus media, to what makes a difference measurable 'impact' in knowledge-attitudes-and –practices and attention. While this might make sense for media, it is a very limited view of communication and a limited slice of life conducted on and expressed through the Internet from a broader linguistic perspective. Applied to the Internet, what works for media only reworks Internet communication as media, while subordinating all other uses, practices and contexts of communication – notably, reducing interaction to sender-receiver relations.

This is not to say that the Internet does not incorporate media properties and practices, but that the Internet is not limited to how those have been understood in theories of mass communications. That comparison proceeds from understanding the Internet as passing information, passing more of it and faster. Empirically, it does speed up and extend communication in time and over distances, but not haphazardly on the receiving end or as a uniform process from the sending end. Instead of a Global Village (where everyone is a sender and anyone can receive information), what we see on the Internet are more like Network Neighborhoods, where people seek, communicate, draw and pass information with those like themselves or, more actively, whom they want to be like.

The social life of the Internet starts with social life conducted on and through it in sociological terms as reference group

behavior. Reference Group theory is the now over half-century old perspective whose principal discovery was role modeling – how we seek out others like ourselves or whom we would want to be like and model behavior experimentally in relation (as reactions) to them, rather than as projection from (or enactments of) internal states such as of values or structural dispositions. In this perspective, information is not just difference passed from a sender added to the latter's internal state. It is embedded in relationships and starts sociologically with reference group behavior as modeling.

Islamization of Social Life in Cyberspace

These were features I observed about the initial stages by which information about Islamic and Middle Eastern culture appeared on the Internet first through technological adepts (Anderson, 2003, 2003-2004). They were mostly students from Middle Eastern and other Muslim countries who went or were sent to study in high-tech universities where the Internet's component technologies were developed in the 1970s and whose early forms spread in the 1980s. Like their local counterparts, they brought avocational as well as vocational interests online, notably including religious and their national cultures. They uploaded digitized copies of religious texts, partly as pious acts of witness to have their religion and information about their countries on the Internet alongside others; and they created electronic forums for actively discussing those and their issues around leading a Muslim life in non-Muslim majority countries. Here were trajectories from special interest groups to weak forms of community with recursive focuses on sharing their means of production. This scientists' Internet became more user-friendly with the World Wide Web in the 1990s, and their efforts to put Islam and national cultures on-line were followed by more conventional culture managers' stepping up to represent 'correct' Islam on-line and fuller pictures of it or of nations they officially and professionally represented. The Web's lower threshold of technical knowledge and the Internet's spread effectively turned what scientists built for their communication into a medium of publication articulating weak (temporary or special interest) forms of community. Thusly, technological adepts who were often amateurs in religion (partly for having

been educated from early ages largely in science and math) were joined by experts in religion and in representing national cultures, and by the end of the 1990s were merging and sharing multiple expertise, cultural as well as technical, and diversifying overall. So, overall, one could both find and bring or produce one's Islam on-line, gathering the like-minded and reaching out to others, often testifying to new experiences of *umma*, *ijtihad* and Muslim identity on line.

The same pattern unfolded in national spaces, where tendencies to contestation conduced to analyses that, highlighting agency, imagined actors primarily as individuals clustering in groups of the like-minded. In these spaces, sorting into Network Neighborhoods was graphically depicted in the later study of the Iranian blogosphere by a group at Harvard University (Kelly & Etling, 2008), who not only mapped it but also identified differential connections within and between them, and whose formation was well underway at least from the advent of the World Wide Web. Rooted in the Internet's own original culture of engineers and scientists, the social mechanism of that formation is less a public sphere conceived as a discursive space of critical dialogues than more immediate and mundane spaces that anthropologists know as Communities of Practice. Comparatively, in structural terms, communities of practice fall between temporarily engaged groups around special interests and more recursive communities resting on common identity. They were first identified in studies of informal learning, where mentoring and peer-to-peer information sharing replace more didactic forms of education focused more broadly on socialization of actors (Lave & Wenger, 1991): their forte is passing/sharing skills. Communities of practice are where people with different bits of information come together, share, and learn from each other and particularly learn through practice, which, more than identity, is their focus – hence, the designation.

Communities of practice have been largely invisible to media-minded views of the Internet. Engineers and scientists take them for granted as ways they work, which is on projects, in groups and networks that assemble different expertise for projects in which specific individuals come and go. Collaboration is their professional habit. It also tends to be invisible on the WWW, where

the product more than the process is displayed and registered in media theory. That process is one of making links and tends to be within reference groups and for collaboration.

Communities of practice as the characteristic form that social life on the Internet takes become more visible with the morphing of initial Web technologies, 'portals' that assemble links, into later social media, which bring back an interactivity of the original scientists' and engineers' Internet that had been obscured by the turn to a publication model that initially marked the World Wide Web. The dynamic starts with developers of Internet technologies, who are their first users: they write their values and work habits code and protocols and by including more and more of those values and habits into its design elements, progressively socialize the Internet. Engineers and scientists who wrote their values and habits of collaboration into it automated more and more of such practices, which passed the Internet into wider communities and, with the World Wide Web, into the public. Web developers added media aggregation and publication as service-delivery, which extended to e-commerce and e-education and then to reciprocal engagements with users (as contributors in their own rights) that became explicit with social media.

If portals were the native format of the Web, their transformation into platforms provided the native format for social media's incorporation of ever more social behavior by developers' studying what users do on-line – particularly how they repurpose platforms by bringing additional interests and practices onto them – and seeking initially to facilitate and ultimately to also automate it. Early social media sites were built from content-management programs that first appeared in business and professional domains, or morphed from directories pointing to individuals into dating sites for connecting with them, meet-ups, fan sites, blogs for bands or artists. In these, developers and users tend to merge, or to blur distinctions between producing and consumption in a joint activity of users' repurposing and developers' seeking to automate that behavior so as to aggregate more and more of it until the Internet becomes a place of increasingly and deeply familiar lifestyles and cultures. In this social dynamic of continuous modeling, users effectively extend the programming of sites with their own data and activities

that developers in turn seek to identify and automate. This is the practical sociological basis underlying processes by which the "consumer becomes producer" (Nevitt, 1972 in Ritzer et al., 2012, p. 379) or "prosumer." The rise of the Internet and of social networking on it have expanded both the practice and academic attention to it (e.g., Ritzer et al., 2012).

Interactivity on social media sites extends key forms of communities of practice. They take a material form of loose networks of weak ties that engage specific interests and transient participants, which sociologists have shown are typical for sharing and seeking information (Granovetter, 1973). By comparison, strong-tie networks, such as among family and friends, who interact frequently and know much about each other, tend to informational redundancy. In network neighborhoods (or strong-tie clusters), everyone knows the same things, while new information comes through friends of friends in other networks (Granovetter, 1983).[1] The sociologist Agusto Valeriani (Valeriani, 2011) has mapped such communities of practice that formed a network neighborhood in North Africa as a mix of programmers and advocates for open-source software, web designers, Internet activists and other experimenters with links into arts and other youth communities that expanded to include less technologically-adept bloggers and others in these fields sharing other interests and skill sets. It was to this network with no center that bloggers and other users of social media turned for tips about how the systems work or, conversely, offered their help, in the Arab Spring.

Valeriani's study is important for its more composite and comprehensive picture of the contexts of Internet activism than the common focus mainly on activists that casts other skills as penumbral to them. The concept of a media-savvy Internet youth ready and enabled by social media to turn to activism is overdrawn: some became activist in defense of blogging, others to help friends with their expertise in fields from web-design and the arts to critical writing, sometimes individually but mostly through networks of friends. Motives for experimenting with blogging and other social media typically began with expressing oneself and extended to reaching others like oneself, or whom one

[1] This distinction between (strong) ties that bind and (weak) ties that link underlies political scientists' later distinction between 'bonding' and 'bridging' social capital that are similar but, focused on coalition-formation, outside the scope of this discussion.

wanted to be like. In this way, loose-tie networks form extended communities of practice, passing information about skills and interests, but not lasting organization. Tech adept participants in the Arab Spring instead turned afterward to using their technology to document its contributions (Radsch, 2008).[1] While skills may have passed, the more immediate outcome was self-referentiality and reflection. Why?

There seem to be two reasons. In general, Wellman (2002) has shown that computer-aided networks grow like other networks, on their margins – that is, by addition of weak ties, which mobilize features of communities of practice that emerge online over communities of identity migrating there. Second, this is less a limit specifically of technological enablement of community formation than about the passage of information in communities of practice into strong-tie networks of more institutional communities of identity. For how this operates, I draw on a third concept, what linguistic anthropologists call 'entextualization' as the expressive form that goes along with the material form of loose-tie networks and practical form of community in them. Entexualization describes a process in which highly individual, very specific and densely contextual information is converted into more general, categorical information – sociologically speaking, a passage from individual contexts to shared code that identifies significance (Kuipers, 1990). This is a process typically framed as rituals of passage, such as in healing rituals that convert specific incidents in time and space into categories, or complaints that are personal into symptoms with wider significance with multiple attachments; entextualizations draw specific experience into shared meanings. Entextualizations occurs as code replacing context, and by such means establishes 'textual authority' that resides in words independent of the utterer.

Outside of ritual, nothing guarantees such passage of fragmentary, local, highly contextualized information and experiences into shared representations that gather up more specific ones. But network neighborhoods are where this gathering occurs on-line. They are its material form and sites. In presenting particular experiences as shared profiles that strong ties refine

[1] Similar patterns have been described by Rahimi (2011) following Iran's 2009 election and after the 2011 Arab Spring demonstrations in Cairo (Barsalou, 2012).

and extend, network neighborhoods are given expressive form that extends weak tie links in communities of practice, which are their practical form, into stronger and more redundant ties of network neighborhoods. As processes, these material, practical and expressive forms of network neighborhoods, communities of practice and entextualization describe the normal social dynamics on the Internet that confer its dualities of continuity and discontinuity with its surroundings.

In such terms, that duality emerges more temporally than spatially, or across time as phases of development – marked in the beginning but diminishing with accumulated practices. This matters in two respects. The more immediate is that as the Internet acquires more social content, a major denominator of that content and practice is middle class culture and lifestyles, particularly of growing professional middle classes. Sociologists associate these classes particularly with post-industrial society, where the majority of workers pass into knowledge-based service occupations. Their 'capital' is not just knowledge but also culture and lifestyle and the Internet where increasing numbers of professional middle classes pursue work, leisure, education amid others like themselves; and they are growing with it worldwide. Recasting this demography in structural terms, the economic sociologist, Manuel Castells, has gone so far as to characterize the Internet as the material base of a new social morphology (Castells, 1996). That may be extreme, but it points to how the epistemology of the social life that gets onto the Internet reflects its practices.

Second, as much as it redenominates communication, the Internet's own proximal roots are more in computing than in communication, and specifically in subordinating communication to computing. Its original design concept envisioned using then relatively cheaper communication to access expensive and scarce computers (Abbate, 1999) through software, and was itself set within a vision of software that could use its results to modify its own operations, which was necessary to model natural processes (Dyson, 2012). While computer scientists take this modeling for granted, it is only beginning to penetrate media studies that, as the media theorist Lev Manovich recently explored, "software takes command" (Manovich, 2013). This registers a concept of

software taking over tasks that engineers successfully automate – essentially by incorporating more extensive and intensive models of and for user behavior – into programs that form a 'stack' that use lower level ones as 'platforms' for higher level operations.

I do not doubt the importance of the Internet for media, or of media, but I do question whether media provide the best lens on the Internet by emphasizing its exceptionalities, starting with exception to older media. Indeed, Internet media do empower new users and new uses; but precisely how needs more attention. I suggest that a more normal sociology of the Internet can be captured through three concepts of its material, practical and expressive forms: as reference groups, whose practical sites are communities of practice that frame entextualizations of local and specific into more portable shared information. This passes culture and lifestyles onto (and into) the Internet broadly associated with and in favor of growing middle classes who use it. Animating them, it also gives expression to and spreads an epistemology based in computing of modeling and automating social behavior that relentlessly pushes the bar of what can be on the Internet.

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