

THE WEB 2.0, BLOGGING, AND THE ARAB INTELLECTUAL: REALITY AND CURRENT CHALLENGES

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Abstract: *The emergence of new information and communication technologies, social media platforms, and the called WEB 2.0, has led to a new digital revolution. This cyber-era has witnessed profound social transformations. Blog and blogging today extend beyond just writing with limited influence. Individuals from diverse social backgrounds, institutions, affiliations, and ideologies have their own or shared spaces to talk about various topics such as daily life, economics, politics, religion, leisure, sports, and others. Intellectuals are not the exception, as they have been seamlessly integrated into these digital spaces. In the Arab world, many social movements and revolutions have gained great momentum using social media platforms and technologies and through the presence of intellectuals, policy / decision-makers as well as ordinary citizens. This paper aims to provide a modest exposition about the reality of the intellectual participation of actors (intellectuals) in the field of blogging in the context of social media platforms and technologies. It also addresses some of the challenges that intellectuals faced in these dynamic, rapidly spreading and developing digital environments.*

Keywords: NTIC, Social Media, Numeric revolution, Blogging, Arab Intellectuals.

1. Introduction

The advent of the internet has triggered a digital revolution and ushered in substantial transformations across multiple facets of human existence. The multiple effects and dimensions of this social revolution encompass a wide range, including the political, cultural, economic, psychological, and other domains. The examination of these transitions from a social perspective is confronted with a multifaceted terrain and a diverse array of comprehensive digital records.

It is important to acknowledge that media and communication outlets serve as valuable analytical publications that facilitate the reporting of social facts in their entirety, encompassing cultural, political, anthropological, economic dimensions, and prior to their transformation into catalysts of change or their underlying reasons.

Lucile Merra observed this in her thesis, where there has been a shift from "social link" to "social impact" (Lucile, 2013: 25). That mean, the way we perceive, understand, and experience social relationships has evolved, leading to a shift in the traditional concept and analysis. The "social link" has not vanished, but according to Casilli (2010), it has transformed into a novel manifestation of human interaction - the realm of digital connections.

Despite this shift and some differences, it is emphasized that these platforms have the potential to promote the development of social interaction, even more than they contribute to its impoverishment (Lucile, 2013: 25).

According to Boyd and Ellison, social media encompasses systems that "support interactions from individual to individual, from individual to several individuals, and from several individuals to several others. Some enable interactions among many people and facilitate the creation of spaces for people to gather and form audiences. It refer to these spaces and the resulting communities as 'networked publics. Usenet, the blogosphere, and social networking sites are all examples of networked publics".

“Social media includes systems that support one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many interactions. Some enable many-to-many interactions and support the creation of spaces for people to gather and publics to form. I call these spaces, and the resultant collective, “networked publics”. Usenet, the blogosphere, and social network sites are all examples of networked publics.” (Boyd and Ellison, 2007).

Analyzing the Arab societies, attention has always been oriented to the occidental perspective regarding social change, as well as discussions about mutation and technology surrounded by the modernity and tradition discourse, Hammami observed that:

“The prevailing discourses surrounding information and communication technology (ICT) in Arab societies, when analyzed, in relation to their connection with modernization tensions, constitute a highly interesting field for monitoring the experimental methods to achieve a model of “reconciliatory modernization” in the realm of communication, as well as within the cultural context from which the description of social uses emerges. In this sense, we can distinguish [...] types of prevailing discourses concerning information and communication technology. They are closely linked to the “reconciliatory modernization” model, despite their distinct differences and the diversity of the elites that support them. These discourses coexist in the public sphere and do not necessarily contradict each other; sometimes, they even intersect.” (Hammami, 2006)

It is important noting that during the period known as the “Arab Spring and Arab revolutions,” international discussions regarding the internet and its media revolved around the issues of neutrality and the need for regulating the digital space (Crosnier and Schafer, 2019). Meanwhile, Arab societies saw the beginning of intensive political and social exploitation of digital media for social communication, with intellectuals, politicians, and the people actively engaging and using these platforms.

2. Literature review

Writing about the topic of intellectuals and blogging in the age of technology is important and not easy, especially in societies with multiple specifics and social, political, and economic dynamics. The past 13 years have witnessed many events in the Arab world, both social and political, which have brought Arab intellectuals to the forefront. The digital spaces have amplified the impact of these events and brought a new world of writing and blogging to the forefront. Therefore, we are discussing the reality of intellectuals in the Arab world in a world of social media technology and digital blogs.

Defining the concept of the intellectual and blogging requires special attention and a substantial discussion, considering its historical context and the cognitive debates surrounding the intellectual and the current impact through blogging. Here are some ideas, which are the result of reviewing relevant literature:

When it comes to discussing the intellectual, it is a concept that piques special interest. Nader Andrawos and Alaa Badr expressed it by saying:

“The term often carries expectation, authority and perhaps a bit of uneasiness.” (Andrawos and Badr, 2020)

Therefore, the concept of the intellectual in contemporary Arab writings was most prominently embodied during the 1960s, influenced by the Gramscian approach and the works of Jean-Paul Sartre, both of whom focus on the social and political role of the intellectual. The translation movement of the works of these two thinkers at that time facilitated the reception, and the concept of the intellectual in the Arab world was primarily understood through the functional description. This perspective saw the intellectual as the critical and confrontational self against authority. (Mufleh, 2020)

However, this view has become limited in our contemporary era, where we can consider the Arab "intellectuals" as a social characteristic, intellectual practice, and a psychological and social structure with a historical dimension that exists in the present. It serves to express reality, the present, the past, and looks forward to the future, just like any other member of their society.

Regarding blogs, we rely on the simplified and clear definition by Matthieu Paldacci: "Weblogs, or simply blogs, are online journals that operate according to a specific format for publication on the internet. They are characterized by a sequence of dated entries or posts that are accessible to the public. These posts can contain text as well as digital documents (such as images, music, videos) or hypertext links. Blogs also feature a network of hypertext links (links that point to other preferred and frequented blogs) and a commenting system (a system that allows readers, whether they are bloggers or not, to express their opinions on a post). These elements contribute to the societal dimension of this technical format for publication." (Paldacci, 2006).

Regarding the challenges faced by Arab intellectuals in the world of technology and the information explosion, researcher Ahmed Mohammed Saleh outlined a set of challenges in an article published in "Al-Hiwar Al-Mutamaddin," with the most important ones being:

- The ambiguous relationship between the intellectuals and the authority has consistently been one of the greatest challenges for Arab intellectuals. However, the Information Age has made this relationship even more tense and turbulent. Advanced information and communication technologies, despite being an empowering force for democratic culture, also lead to control over information, which can help maintain power.

- The decline in informational levels, even among the elite, and the prevalence of digital illiteracy when dealing with computers and the internet, along with the dominance of technological fear, and the weakness of the English language as the prevalent information language.

- The ongoing battle between conservators and modernists, those who want the present to be a private and traditional past, and those who reject the past and tradition, advocating for emulating the West and its civilization.

- The challenge associated with the Arab reality, which indicates a state of stagnation that isn't easy to overcome. Illiteracy, poverty, ignorance, unemployment, intellectual poverty, the brain drain, all exacerbated by reports of human development, are in a state of poverty and oppression. Limited economic opportunities, social exclusion, neglect of public services, and bias, among other factors, are primary sources of human deprivation and, consequently, a contraction of freedom.

Although these challenges were agreeable to their author at the time, the situation today is significantly different. The circumstances have changed in many aspects of life, including the reality of technology usage, where, in itself, it has become a mechanism in the hands of intellectuals to produce knowledge, form opinions, as well as engage in critique, confrontation, and the shaping of public discourse and consciousness.

Said Hareb, considered that "the widespread use of technology pushed the role of the traditional intellectual into the background, almost obliterating it. Emerged generations in the Arab societies have become familiar with technology before they became familiar with the intellectuals." (Hareb, 2012). Hareb, further explains that information technology has turned intellectualism into a self-sustaining industry with its own facilities, commodities, and services. It has introduced new concepts in various fields to the cultural lexicon.

On the contrary, Ali Mohammed Fakhro raised concerns about the traditional state of writing and blogging, the era of "pen, paper, and ink." He considered that communication and media technology had negative effects on the human mind and its intellectual output. He criticized the form of writing and the language used in technology-mediated communication, which he sees as lacking creativity, consisting of simple and short texts unlike traditional writing, which, in his opinion, is richer and more expressive. The author stated:

“Considering the studies and experimental findings that confirm the negative outcomes resulting from human interaction with communication technology, particularly the internet, the foremost of these outcomes is the comparison of the abilities and efficiency of students in reading and writing using a computer versus using pen and paper. In other words, it is a comparison between modern technology and old technology. The results confirm that using books, paper, and pen yields better outcomes in terms of longer and more vocabulary-rich sentence structures and better comprehension and deeper understanding of what the student reads”. (Fakhro, 2011)

We may partially agree with the writer on some details; indeed, there is an impact of technology and its repercussions on educational processes in general. However, I firmly believe that this perspective is severely lacking and does not provide objective justifications or the complete picture. When it comes to the richness of a student's language, it is worth noting that digital and virtual technology has contributed significantly to the proliferation of digital writing and blogging. Thousands of platforms for publishing digital books and accompanying applications, numerous blogs dedicated to intellectual, political, literary, and artistic issues, tens of thousands of concise accounts, pages, and blogs on platforms like Facebook and Twitter, among others, daily disseminate excerpts from the works of their authors, along with their opinions, ideas, and emotions regarding contemporary and current issues. All of these cater to categories that include elites, academics, researchers, and Arab intellectuals. Therefore, the writer did not provide or reinforce his idea and stance with convincing justifications or references to what he relied upon.

In this context, there was a response and comment from Walid Abbas regarding this article, where he says:

"The writer criticizes computer programs in the same context due to the efficiency of programs that facilitate reading, writing, or research. He considers that this reduces the use of the brain's natural capabilities to overcome challenges or mysteries in fields such as reading and writing. This might be true, but it allows humans to utilize their brain's capabilities in more complex tasks and to solve scientific and intellectual problems more significant than the everyday use of language. Here, the writer should be reminded that he is talking about the fundamental function of technology, which is the invention and innovation of tools that relieve the brain from basic or primitive functions so that it can devote its efforts to developing more complex ideas and solving bigger problems." (Abbas, 2011).

We agree with this comment and critique. Today, artificial intelligence indeed reflects how the human mind is no longer just a classic description of intelligence, memory, storage, and perception. It involves complex processes of the mind's ability to innovate and create, erasing its past and dazzling with its future.

3. Objectives and methods

This qualitative study relied on various literary sources related to the subject in general, addressing issues related to intellectuals and the knowledge society in the era of technology. We also drew upon the contributions of Arab bloggers on the subject. Furthermore, we relied on our own observations as researchers and individuals interested in the topic, which were derived from daily experiences in the digital space.

The study's objectives are related to attempting to analyze and understand the reality of the Arab intellectual in the digital spaces, as well as identifying the challenges and issues they face. Additionally, the study aims to present some of the opportunities available to Arab intellectuals through modern social communication technologies and platforms that facilitate blogging and provide diverse and important opportunities.

This study represents an initial attempt to address a topic that raises various knowledge-related questions. We started by attempting to familiarize ourselves with the topic and some related discussions, and the project may eventually produce several papers.

4. Results and discussion

1- NTIC and blogging: reality, discourse and practices

Information and communication technologies, along with their digital communication channels and platforms, have significantly and profoundly influenced the process of blogging in general. They have played a crucial role in shaping the blogs and pages of Arab intellectuals, making access easier and dissemination wider.

Sociologically, media and communication technology have shifted perspectives on social concepts, or at least, some have become intricately linked to the socio-cultural impact of technology. For instance, social capital has become more extensive and less costly in the digital communication world because ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) have made it easier for individuals to access the latest information (Shim and Eom, 2009). This quickly leads to the formation of multiple and intensive social networks.

This new reality has not any segments of society, including the subject of our study. Their blogs, in various forms, have found their place within the process of social change and digitization. While some researchers argue that the occurrences related to digital technology cannot be entirely ascribed to it alone, emphasizing that its historical development and overall influence far outweigh the secondary effects assigned to it, regardless of their significance. (Gonzalez-Quijano, 2012).

The nature of Arab states and societies, often characterized by authoritarianism and a value system and culture that enforce various forms of strictness, sometimes coercion, and constraint, has led to limited spaces for free writing, editing, and expression.

However, media and communication technologies, despite everything, have contributed to amplifying the voice of Arab intellectuals on one hand and diversifying discourse for the recipients, thereby influencing the degree of society and the state's response in different ways on the other hand.

Observing the reality of blogging among many intellectuals, it is evident that much of what was once prohibited and taboo is now accepted, circulated, and spread. This contributes to the dynamics of freedom of expression and its accompanying practices and impacts."

2- Promoting digital culture and the proliferation /confrontation of fake news

In the past, one had to wait for conferences, cultural events, and exhibitions to access the discourse of Arab intellectuals and interact with them. Today, with the momentum of technology and communication, many intellectuals engage in digital and virtual blogging. Accessing their ideas and engaging in discussions has become readily available and incredibly fast.

Impressions and reactions can now be gathered in real-time, regardless of the direction. This has contributed to the formation, or at least the beginning of the formation, of a digital culture, driven by technology and the presence of intellectuals through social media platforms.

The nature of Arab states and societies, characterized by a regulatory framework and a value system and culture that enforce various forms of strictness (UK GOV, 2007), and sometimes coercion and constraints, with limited spaces for writing, editing, and expressing oneself freely, has posed significant challenges.

However, media and communication technologies, despite everything, have contributed to amplifying the voice of the Arab intellectuals, on one hand, and have diversified the discourse received by the audience, influencing the level of societal and state responsiveness in this regard, on the other hand.

It is noticeable that in the realm of blogging, many intellectuals are now able to discuss and circulate ideas that were once prohibited and taboo. This contributes to the dynamics of freedom of expression and its associated practices and impacts. This Dynamic, are faced by many challenges such as the Fake News.

The presence in social media spaces, especially for the Arab intellectual, constitutes a significant challenge, especially in the face of the challenges imposed by the nature of the virtual world and global events.

What is known as "fake news" has raised many concerns because determining the accuracy of news and opinions and identifying their sources require vigilance and diligence from all parties. "Identifying what makes people less likely to endorse false information and believe in it is an important and timely issue in a practical sense" (Bowes and Tasimi, 2022).

Fake news is not merely a contentious matter; it is a dilemma in the world of "information," involving intellectuals, recipients, the media, and especially social media and their narratives. This has led Johan Farkas and Jannick Schou to consider that: "The dominant narrative of our time is that democracy is in a state of emergency caused by social media, changes to journalism and misinformed masses. This crisis needs to be resolved by reinstating truth at the heart of democracy, even if this means curtailing civic participation and popular sovereignty." (Farkas and Schou, 2019).

This challenge places the Arab intellectual in a sensitive position, especially in societies with collective and emotional cultural backgrounds, where every piece of information has its impact. This makes the intellectual also responsible for "the development of digital competences."

Social media and the rapid technological advances in communication make the Arab intellectual face a unique challenge, a social and ethical challenge towards their society.

The societal sensitivities, especially in Arab and Islamic communities, towards topics such as sex, the body, freedom, extremism, and more, make intellectuals prisoners of their ideas and their social reception. Digital media is a tool for widespread and rapid content dissemination. The reception categories are not filtered, as was the case in previous situations, whether in books, cultural opposition, publishing roles, or intellectual sessions, where dissemination was limited, and there might not be widespread "public" impact, only within the circle of participants, interested parties, and attendees at the event. This is an important challenge and issue facing the Arab intellectual in particular.

3- The culture, identity and language challenges

We were discussing the issue of blogging and its challenges for the Arab intellectual, where social and technological changes make the topic more complex. Cultural and linguistic identity is an important, even concerning element in a globalized world and in spaces with a high flow of information, ideas, and ideologies.

If we consider that most crises are not separate from stirring elements of culture and identity, then digital spaces accelerate that, and the echoes of the conflict become prominent.

Any element that is raised has repercussions on cultural, religious, and heritage components, and in reality, this is an age-old human issue.

4- Knowledge production

Knowledge production, in general, and through blogs, is at the heart of a significant debate. To begin with, we question whether what is being exchanged among Arab intellectuals is genuinely producing knowledge, or is it a matter of reposting and disseminating knowledge that already exists?

The production of knowledge, in general, cannot be discussed outside its cognitive, historical, theoretical, and empirical frameworks, and institutional factors may intervene in the legitimacy of knowledge or its nature. What we are heading towards is that in the digital world, through modern technologies and media, it allows intellectuals the opportunity and the necessary resources to attempt knowledge production or at least contribute to the accumulation of knowledge and development.

The competitiveness enabled by presence in the digital and virtual world is an advantage for improving the quality of knowledge, discourse, and thought. At the same time, it poses a significant challenge to the Arab intellectual.

It involves building a knowledge society that harnesses its resources on one hand and utilizes available resources, especially technology, on the other hand. Here, the most significant challenges faced by Arab societies and consequently, the intellectual elites, come to the forefront. According to a report titled "Building Knowledge Societies in the Arab Region: Arabic Language Gateway to Knowledge" published in 2019 by the UNESCO office in Cairo, this report clearly highlights a contradiction represented by the relative backwardness in the development and production of information and communication technology compared to advanced countries on one hand, despite its widespread use in the Arab region on the other hand.

Assuming that personal responses to news and messages are a simple means to enhance collective knowledge and expand it, consequently creating "intelligence" from "knowledge" (Pór and Molloy, 2002), where it can be inferred that blogs provide a forum for learning. Therefore, the experience of generating collective knowledge can / should be applied to traditional educational environments. This underscores the capacity of blogs, both in general and particularly those belonging to intellectuals and individuals interested in various issues related to human existence, to produce knowledge. (Williams and Jacobs, 2004).

It is challenging to conclusively ascertain the creation of knowledge within the domain of Arab intellectual blogs or research in a genuinely, meaningful and profound sense. However, studies demonstrate that historically, and through various pathways exercised by blogs and various platforms, knowledge accumulation processes have occurred. This is an important factor and, at the very least, a facilitator for producing various types of knowledge.

5. Conclusion

The ongoing discussion regarding NTIC (New Technologies of Information and Communication), blogging, intellectuals, and social media activities gives rise to a multitude of unusual inconsistencies and contradictions. The pivotal aspect of this discourse revolves around the roles of intellectuals, which have historically, persistently, and will continue to be central to the dialogue, particularly concerning their ability to stay informed about current developments. In Arab societies, intellectuals have consistently been expected to articulate stances on concurrent matters and occurrences. However, the ironic aspect of this subject, as observed and pondered by Cusnir et al:

"Are we currently witnessing the inevitable decline of the intellectual figure, as it was magnified during the Dreyfus affair era and the post-war decades? If the model of the intellectual, epitomized by Jean-Paul Sartre among others, has lost its luster, intellectuals have not completely vanished from the horizon. Instead, they have been marginalized and replaced by high-profile figures who have emerged on the scene, posing a risk of overshadowing the slower, foundational work undertaken by less famous individuals." (Cusnir, Pélissier and Rieffel, 2021).

Revisiting the original concept, even if we contemplate the intellectual in the role of a political participant, the role they play in confrontation, criticism, support, or justification is a subject of debate. "Reducing the intellectual to merely a political actor implies a kind of trivialization of the liberating roles of culture and thought in society" (Abdul Latif, 2023).

It's worth noting here that digital social platforms have become a significant opportunity for intellectuals to express themselves, their communities, and their interests, and even to promote their products. The digital market is also a given reality, with various challenges surrounding it taken into consideration.

The current contradictions, enhanced by technology or at the very least accelerated in their emergence, are evident in the online spaces, blogging platforms, and others. While these spaces may demand specific or diverse roles from intellectuals, in the midst of the "buzz" and

"trend" phenomena, they provide opportunities for media dominance by what are often referred to as social media celebrities and influencers, groups that are typically considered "purveyors of frivolity" (Abdul Latif, 2023).

The revival of the intellectual's identity required a form of critical confrontation, on one hand, and engagement with the production of new actors, as they now fill various aspects of our cultural life. Alongside the roles of the intellectual in criticism and enlightenment, there emerges today the task of capturing and containing the content of virtual spaces as another essential role. These spaces have gained significant influence in shaping many aspects of shallowness and superficiality in our society. Today's intellectual is tasked with a new role in virtual spaces, which have, in recent years, been filled with blogs characterized by conservatism and a lack of connection to the scientific, intellectual, and technological advancements in this new world (Abdul Latif, 2023). It is a role that leans more towards intervention than expression and criticism.

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