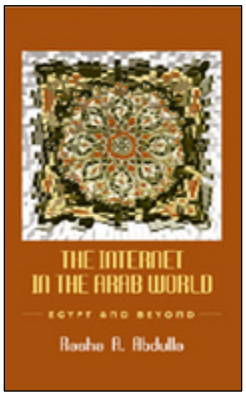
International Journal of Communication *5* (2011), Book Review 85-86 1932-8036/2011BKR0085

Rasha A. Abdulla, **The Internet in the Arab World: Egypt and Beyond, New York:** Peter Lang, International Academic Publishers**,** 2007, 175 pp., $65.95 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
Marina Saleeb
University of Southern California



The Middle East has become synonymous with traditional conservatism. However, with the advent of the Internet, this stereotype is being shattered. Rasha A. Abdulla's *The Internet in the Arab World: Egypt and Beyond* demonstrates a growing trend of Internet use, and describes how it bridges the gap between the Western and Arab worlds. Her book is a testimony to the revolutionary transformation in the Arab world ignited by the Internet. Its thorough analysis of the history, religion, and governments of the region advocates a push for a permanent change through information sharing. It is a well-written exposition that contains a plethora of credible facts, statistics, and studies presented in an easy-to-read format. Just as the Internet gives Arabs a voice to be heard, *The Internet in the Arab World* tells the world to open its ears and listen.

The book begins by exploring the digital divide that characterizes the Arab world. Abdulla sees the perception of a divide as a driving force, motivating Arab nations to build their IT infrastructure. Factors that caused the divide include the lack of enhanced technology, notably that which would improve Internet connectivity, quality, and speed. Although the Arab world seeks to close the gap, it remains at the lower tier of world nations, with Arabs making up a mere 2% of Internet users in 2006.

Abdulla correlates the digital divide to the socioeconomic development of the region, but cites optimistic examples of rapidly growing Internet-friendly nations such as the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Bahrain. A main factor of sluggish Arab use of the Internet is the limited availability of Arabic language sites online. In 2006, Arabic language content made up less than 2% of the Internet. However, new advanced technology has promoted "Arabisation" by translating content into Arabic and thus widening the potential and actual Arab-speaking online audience. By taking the digital divide as a starting point, Abdulla explains the Arab world's unique place in the online world.

Egypt, which leads the Arab world in the effort to narrow the global digital divide, is a recurring example throughout the book. Its advances were fostered by its government, which partly puts to rest the myth that all Arab authorities oppose the Net. To this end, Egypt created a mutual relationship with top IT firms, and as it gained knowledge and skill from training programs of companies, such as Intel, IBM, Cisco, Microsoft, and Oracle, these corporations acquired new personnel. The Egyptian government encouraged this partnership by creating Smart Village in Cairo, similar to Dubai's Internet City. Smart Village attracted corporations to Egypt by offering technological services, financial investment, and tax benefits. Due to these and similar efforts, the Internet is increasingly integrated into Egyptian society, as shown by the proliferation of Internet cafés that allow greater information access for citizens. Abdulla

Copyright © 2011 (Marina Saleeb, msaleeb@usc.edu). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at http://ijoc.org.

provides a deep analysis of Egypt's promotion of increased Web use, suggesting it is a precursor for what will develop elsewhere in the Arab world. Egypt's model is one that other countries in the region are likely to emulate in developing their IT systems.

The author uses statistics to support her humanizing intentions. In the second section of her book, she tells the stories of the people behind the Internet growth in the region. She makes explicit the social and religious context of Internet users in the Arab world instead of relying solely on facts and technicalities of network regulations. The chapter "Internet and Islam" frames the effects of the Internet on the citizens of the Arab world, and in it, Abdulla proposes that greater Internet access cultivates further dialogue between the Western and Arab worlds, especially after 9/11. Internet access allows Islamic Arabs to redefine their Web-based image by contributing to the blogospheres and the Net. She also breaks new ground when she argues that the Internet benefits Muslims minority populations in Western countries because it serves as a source of connection to their religious values and to other followers through portals and discussion boards. Abdulla adds a personal plea to readers to not be blinded by Western writings on Islam online; instead, she urges greater utilization of the Internet to listen to all voices. Another chapter, "Is the Internet Good for You?" examines the psychological and cultural implications of the Internet in the Arab world. The author builds on a "use and gratification" model to analyze her research, exemplifying her interest in the "social and psychological factors . . . values and beliefs" of the users, rather than on the content of the messages (p. 92).

The last three chapters place the statistics and sources into a practical context. Abdulla explores the use of the Internet by Arab English-speaking university students in Egypt and their feelings toward the Internet as a tool for expression. She derives seven hypotheses focused on (1) gender, (2) year in school, (3) type of Internet connectivity, (4) level of skills needed, (5) Internet exposure, (6) affinity, and (7) satisfaction. More specifically, she assesses the difference in Internet use motives and Internet exposure in terms of time spent online between males and females. She also examines the positive correlation between use motives with Internet affinity and Internet satisfaction, as well as the difference between high and low levels of operational skills necessary for Internet use compared with use motives, along with time spent online. These hypotheses provide valuable information that is key to understanding how technology impacts the mobilization of Arab civil society. Hypothesis seven, for example, posits the "positive correlation between Internet exposure and use among Arab English-speaking university students" (p. 110). Results indicate interesting new developments such as the Internet being used for social interaction. Abdulla asserts that cultures are converging through Net communication, and thus the cultural gap between the Western and Arab worlds is decreasing.

The Internet in the Arab World transforms data and dry statistics into practical, intriguing terms. The rise of Internet use in the Middle East is a multifaceted phenomenon, encompassing economic, political, social, and cultural dimensions of the Arab world. Abdulla puts people before percentages and charts. This book is a welcome addition, given the rise of Islamaphobia in the West. The author's deep analysis of the growing IT sector illustrates the long-standing lack of communication between Western media and the citizens of the Arab world. The increase in its online participation puts the Arab world on the same playing field as that of the rest of the globe; Arabs are beginning to catch up. *The Internet in the Arab World* provides a fresh look at the modernizing Arab world.