

Understanding Popular Arab Bloggers: From Public Spheres to Cultural Citizens

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This article addresses the usefulness of the concepts public sphere, counterpublics, and cultural citizenship for understanding some of the most popular noncommercial Lebanese, Egyptian, and Kuwaiti bloggers in the period 2009–2010. It compares the political and media landscapes, drawing on semi-structured interviews and the most common blogging themes in these three contexts. While the notion of counterpublics was found useful for understanding some types of blogging community, cultural citizenship stands out as a more flexible, process-oriented concept capturing how bloggers acculturate information and entertainment as sources of empowerment, resistance, and community belonging. The popular bloggers can be characterized as having consumerist, civil society, or formal politics trajectories, each challenging traditional power structures in ways that can be traced to specific national contexts.

Keywords: Arab bloggers, cultural citizenship, counterpublics, politics and consumerism

Since 2005, Arab digital networks purveying new pop cultural trends and human rights movements have burgeoned. Intellectuals, politicians, students, and activists have become adept at using Internet-enabled media to disseminate and discuss ideas and protest censorship, women's and minority rights violations, torture by police, and government corruption. The term Arab Spring has become a journalistic metaphor for the power of digital media and citizen journalism to fuel popular uprisings against repression. Yet what the Arab uprisings more tellingly demonstrated was how the interaction between mobile telephones, Internet, and pan-Arab satellite television circulated ideas found in social media to much wider national and international audiences.

The evolving relationship between "old" and "new" media is what Chadwick (2011) called the *hybrid media environment*, where mainstream media are challenged by new media actors, resulting in power struggles to "control, police and redraw boundaries" between various "actors, organizations and assemblages" (p. 10). Adapting this concept, Naomi Sakr (2013) described how the "satellite-internet

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divide" in Egypt was bridged incrementally in the years before the revolutionary moment: "Concerned Egyptian citizens, journalists and politicians made heavy use of the online space for political communication precisely because mainstream offline media were largely closed to them" (p. 334). Digital media in authoritarian and transitioning societies are often portals for alternative information and hubs of civic activism and resistance (Kulikova & Perlmutter, 2007; Lagerkvist 2010; Sreberny & Khiabany, 2010). In authoritarian and transitioning societies, the balance of forces between old and new media, and between foreign and local media, differs from that in liberal democracies, so any analysis of the hybrid media environment needs to take account of local or national contexts (Howard & Hussein, 2013).

Marwan Kraidy (2007a) has also argued for studying the evolving media ecology in terms of "the symbolic field created by interactions between multiple media, from micro-text messaging to region-wide satellite broadcasting" (p. 140):

Arab hypermedia space is constituted by various types of communicators (citizens, consumers, activists, etc.) using email, mobile telephony, text messaging, digital cameras, electronic newspapers, and satellite television. This space's non-hierarchical nature invites a rethinking of Arab information dynamics. (ibid.)

So, rather than concentrating on old or new media, researchers should study their interactions or flows: the nodes, the issues, and the dissemination of meaning. This article focuses on bloggers, placing them in the context of their relationships—with each other, to local mainstream media, and to the mediascapes that shape their participation. Facebook and Twitter proved crucial to subsequent events, but it was through blogs that most of these individuals initially established their public personas, contact networks, and reputations.

In contrast to news media that focus on elites and pan-Arab issues, Arab blogs have been described as subjective spaces that blur the boundaries between the private and the public, the transnational and the local, and entertainment and politics (Douai, 2009; Etling, Kelly, Faris, & Palfrey, 2009). As such, they are alternative discursive arenas that may challenge the political, social, and cultural boundaries of what can be discussed in Arab mediated public spheres. The project on which this article is based explored these notions through the work of popular bloggers from several of the liveliest and less censored Arab blogospheres—Lebanon, Egypt, and Kuwait during a segment of time in 2009–2010.² This article's aim is to explore the usefulness of the concepts public sphere, counterpublics, and cultural citizenship in explaining the character and significance of popular bloggers in three different contexts right before the Arab uprisings catapulted competing platforms to the forefront.

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Public Spheres, Counterpublics, and Cultural Citizenship

Despite numerous criticisms of the Habermasian bourgeois public sphere (Butsch, 2009; Calhoun, 1992; Fraser, 1990) and Habermas' own analysis of its downfall in the face of corporate media and commercialism (1992), Middle East scholars consistently use the concept, even if it is ultimately rejected. Marc Lynch argued that satellite television and social media have effected a widening of the Arab public sphere by introducing new voices and forms of engagement via increased access to information and opinion (2007, 2011). Studies of social media in the region are also framed in light of their relevance to a Habermasian public sphere, though they acknowledge the problems of upholding this ideal in the 21st-century world (Murphy, 2011; Siapera, 2009; Zayani, 2008). El-Nawawy and Khamis (2011), for example, analyzed how the comment threads of blogs by two top Egyptian bloggers, Wael Abbas and Nawara Negm, reflected the sensitive issue of Muslim-Christian relations. Although el-Nawawy and Khamis say the blogs were characterized "by bipolarity, strategic action, venting angry emotions, and the absence of the middle ground of negotiation and rational-critical deliberations," (p. 248) they concluded that the "accessibility, egalitarianism and equality" in the discussion still nurtured citizen journalism and a version of the public sphere (p. 247). In later work, it becomes clear that el-Nawawy and Khamis' (2013) analysis refers primarily to Egyptian "political blogs" rather than popular blogs in general. For scholars of Arab societies, the continuing appeal of the public sphere notion lies in digital media's potential to open up new physical or ideational public spaces to discuss issues of common concern, despite the uneven access and the nascency of civil society.

In contrast, Hirschkind (2006) argued that the public sphere notion could not accommodate the ways public deliberation intertwined with discipline in his study of how Egyptian cassette sermons cultivate both personal ethical virtue and the common good. Rather, he contended, *counterpublics* better describe the combination of normative and deliberative debates with communicative practices oriented to personal self-improvement, public participation, and incorporation of Islamic ethical norms into everyday life (pp. 106-108, cf. pp. 139-140). Western liberal notions separating state from society and public from private cannot, Hirschkind concluded, account for the union of "the practice of virtues and the deliberation of issues of public concern" (p. 107) together with the embodied sensibility and affective performance characteristic of public deliberation in Middle Eastern tradition.

A somewhat different, more commonly used notion of counterpublics is Nancy Fraser's (1990) concept of *subaltern counterpublics*. She argued that in fact there were historically, as there are today, many class-, gender-, and race-based publics outside the liberal male-dominated Habermasian public sphere. These are "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (p. 67). These groups use their own media to define their own social realities, and as Dahlberg (2011) points out,

digital media is seen as enabling voices excluded from dominant discourse . . . to form counter-publics and counter-discourses; to link up with other excluded voices in developing representative, strategically effective counter-discourses; and subsequently to contest the discursive boundaries of the mainstream public sphere. (p. 861)

Digital counterpublics can take the form of alternative or marginalized groups' media sites, social movement initiatives, and other online spaces. But, as Downey and Fenton (2003) argue, "a degree of interaction with the mainstream media may be one of the criteria for successful political intervention" (p. 193).

The notion of counterpublics has been fruitful in cases where bloggers come together for common cause or share identity positions. Haugbolle (2007) found that in 2005 and 2006, Lebanese bloggers functioned as a counterpublic, "compared to the machinery of institutional politics in Lebanon." They provided spaces of interaction between opposing viewpoints, where "new forms of political debate and reporting challenge the role of the intellectual establishment as the main defenders of civil liberties and social critique" (p. 22). Feminist scholars have used Fraser's term subaltern counterpublics to describe Arab women's discourse and participation in fiction, websites, satellite television, and blogs (Elsadda, 2010; Matar, 2007; Skalli, 2006). Michael Warner's (2002) work on queer counterpublics suggests that even youth who are not otherwise "subaltern" become counterpublics through ad hoc participation in and identification with a counterpublic discourse. What is crucial is that they collectively share an awareness of their status as subordinate and together contest dominant ideas, policies, and discourse circulating in the public sphere (pp. 86–87).

In short, Arab media scholars see digital and satellite media as tools for new voices raising controversial issues or prompting public debate of existing political, religious, and economic power structures. Notions of counterpublicness have been invoked regarding either identity positions within alternative or marginalized groups, or cases when digital media users with different positions debate or make common cause. Some of these groups have made inroads into various Arab public spheres by getting certain topics onto the mainstream media agenda.³ However, *who* and *what* are considered marginalized or alternative in the mainstream media may change over time, or become complicated in different national media environments, or constitute the mainstream in transnational mediated publics where varying media agendas contradict each other (Fraser, 2007; Jurkiewicz, 2011).

In this regard, a more flexible concept that may aid in understanding popular bloggers who do not see themselves primarily as political activists, or who engage sporadically in civic activities, is cultural citizenship. This since it signifies attempts to understand the role of everyday sources and resources (information and entertainment-seeking) in individuals' and groups' constructions of identity and engagement in communities. Cultural citizenship has a long-standing theoretical heritage; especially strong is the strand linked to identity politics and the struggle for rights of cultural recognition (cf. Miller, 2007). However, cultural citizenship as developed by Joke Hermes (2006) focuses on practices of identity construction, political activity, and the formation of shared values concerning the Internet:

Studying cultural citizenship is a project of understanding public opinion and the building of shared identities among audiences. It includes a number of "rights" (to belong to a community, to offer one's views, to express preferences) as well as responsibilities (such

³Many Arab media outlets are either state-owned or owned by businesses closely allied to governments or to the above-mentioned influential groups (cf. Pintak 2011)

as respecting other people's tastes, or how they are different from oneself). It is how we use (popular) media texts and everyday culture generally to understand, take up, reflect on and reform identities that are embedded in communities of different kinds (ranging from virtual, interpretative communities to membership of sports clubs or fan groups). (p. 303)

This concept acknowledges the relationship between private identity motivations and the sharing of pleasurable and meaningful information activities. In this it resembles Hirschkind's notion of Islamic counterpublics that bridge the public and the private. Cultural citizenship entails attending to the way individuals or groups search, accumulate, and share information, values, and meaningful experiences, whether through political engagement, consumer critique, or popular culture in everyday life situations. Enacting cultural citizenship points to deeply felt needs to reach out to the like-minded and, under certain conditions, to act together.

So how do bloggers enact cultural citizenship? Here it is useful to borrow Peter Dahlgren's (2011) model of five types of online participation in civic life: *trajectories* (the direction of the engagement), *modalities* (the character of communication), *motivation* (why), *practices of sociality* (how it is kept going), and *visibility* ("where it ends up") (pp. 91–100). Most relevant for this article is the first concept of trajectories, namely, ways of characterizing different directions taken by popular bloggers from three Arabic blogospheres. One trajectory is that of *consumption*: it promises both fulfillment of basic needs and pleasure through shopping and culture but is also closely intertwined with lifestyle values that have "to do with how we should live and what kind of society we want" (ibid., p. 92). The *civil society* trajectory is engagement related to noncommercial, non-state-related associations of friends, colleagues, and communities around shared interests (e.g., women's associations, health charities, awareness campaigns). The *formal politics* trajectory is "institutionalized" involvement in formal politics, social movements, lobbying groups, and NGO networks.

These trajectories clearly overlap in actual online use, but this flexibility also allows for an understanding of how bloggers may enact cultural citizenship differently over time. Bloggers with a mainly consumerist trajectory can engage more in civil society, or those with a formal politics trajectory can move into civil society at different points in time. Moreover, the trajectories can be seen as different ways of enacting cultural citizenship—bloggers using their rights to express identity, make their own sense of the flow of mediated goods across and within national boundaries, and bond with others while sharing this sense-making. Finally, cultural citizenship, with its emphasis on acculturation and the trajectories of civil society and consumerism, allows for types of empowerment other than collective action or institutional involvement.

A Bird's-Eye View of Popular Egyptian, Lebanese, and Kuwaiti Bloggers

Egypt, Lebanon, and Kuwait were chosen because several studies showed they had active and lively political blogospheres from 2005 until 2010, when this study started (Etling et al., 2009; Haugbolle, 2007). Egypt, by far the largest Arab country, has the most diverse blogosphere, even if this difference is somewhat mitigated by the country's low broadband penetration (Ghannam, 2011). For the study, the

most popular noncommercial, individual Arabic- and English-language blogs were chosen without a priori judgment of their content. "Popular" is defined as the most well-linked and visited, as many links and visits increase the chance that the ideas in the blogs are widely circulated in the blogosphere and therefore hold potential to impact mainstream media discourse and participatory public spheres (Wimmer, 2009). This does not mean they are representative of each blogosphere or each society.

The procedure for choosing the most popular noncommercial bloggers began with subjecting several Lebanese, Egyptian, and Kuwaiti blog aggregators to a LexiURL Link Impact Search, a program that records the number of inlinking domains (Thelwall, 2009). The top 100 "most linked to" blogs from this search were then sorted according to their Alexa.com ranking, which averages the total number of visits over a three-month period. From this an aggregated list of the 30 most linked to and visited blogs was made for each blogosphere. Business blogs, forum blogs, blogs inundated with advertising, and inactive (in 2009 and 2010) blogs were then manually examined and excluded. From those fitting the criteria, the first five English- and Arabic-language bloggers were selected for each country making a total of 10 bloggers considered for each blogosphere. In the Lebanese list, more English-language blogs than Arabic ones were higher up in the ranking; the reverse was true for Egypt. What stood out about the Kuwaiti list was that several blogs had to be disqualified due to inactivity or changed domain, reflecting the waning of the blogosphere in Kuwait as Twitter took off in 2009.⁴ At least 8 out of 10 bloggers in each of the three blogospheres was interviewed (see Table 1). The choice of bloggers for study was discussed in semi-structured interviews with the bloggers, who said they had met or knew virtually all those included for each respective blogosphere.⁵

The study included every 10th blog post from April 1, 2009, to April 30, 2010, for all blogs from each of the three countries. The interviews were conducted in late 2010, 2011 and early 2012. The majority of the blogs are still available online, but by 2012 most of the bloggers had expanded their activities to other social media platforms, working as journalists and commentators, new media entrepreneurs, or activists. A reputation as a well-known blogger thus could turn blogging into a springboard to further online work in journalism, activism, politics, relationship therapy, commentary, photography, Web design, illustration, or music criticism. The following sections are based mainly on our interviews, though some examples are derived from our analyses of blogging content and secondary literature (Ramsay, 2012; Riegert & Ramsay, 2013). All statements attributed to the bloggers refer to the interviews unless otherwise indicated.⁶

⁴The link impact analysis and manual examination of top bloggers took place in June and August 2010. Research assistant Mina Zekri produced the LexiURL Link Impact Search and its combination with Alexa.com rankings for the top-30 lists.

⁵Other studies of some of the same top bloggers are el-Nawawy and Khamis (2013), Jurkiewicz (2011), and Siapera (2009).

⁶ Their online pseudonyms are used for those bloggers who are not commonly known by their real names. See Table 1. Translations were carried out within the project by Professor Gail Ramsay or Mina Zekri. Dialect questions were directed to the bloggers themselves.

Etling et al. (2009) demonstrated quantitatively that there was not one Arab blogosphere, but numerous national blogospheres and even, in some cases, subnational and transnational blogging clusters, based on their linking patterns. On the other hand, certain cultural commonalities across the Arab world should be noted at the outset. In mediated public discourse, sex (i.e., premarital, extramarital, or homosexual relations), religion (i.e., sectarian issues, interpretations of one's own religion, or criticism of religious authorities), and politics (i.e., criticizing royalty, the leadership, or the army) are considered controversial topics. Taboos on public discourse about these issues vary across the Arab world, and the punishments for transgressing them range from censorship and Internet filtering to incarceration and death. Despite this, virtually all the bloggers we interviewed said blogs are ideal for discussing controversial political, cultural, and social issues and norms.

All the top Lebanese, Egyptian, and Kuwaiti bloggers exhibited a substantial degree of mutual interaction within each national context, meaning they mentioned or linked to each other in their blogs and met on occasion (Riegert, 2014). In interviews, most of the bloggers in the three contexts said they had attended blogger meetings or "tweet-ups." Some had become offline friends; others remained online comrades. Yet others developed mutual animosity or ideological criticism of each other (Jurkiewicz, 2012). The bloggers tended to link more to bloggers in the same language (Etling et al., 2009; Riegert, 2014, p. 70), but this does not translate neatly into separate subnational blogospheres, since Egyptian and Kuwaiti bloggers especially were prone to "code-switch," using different languages in their blogs depending on the given blog post. Ramsay (2012) found that the language used in Egyptian blogs was associated with the blogs' purpose, such that informational ("educational") blogs tended to use Modern Standard Arabic, whereas activist blogs tended to use colloquial dialect. The interviews revealed that the extensive use of English was due to a complex of factors: first-generation bloggers' initial lack of Arabic software, their multilingual educations (i.e., the perceived difficulty of writing in Arabic), or personal goals and preferences like the intended audience and worldview.⁷

Not for any of the three national sets of popular bloggers was there necessarily a relation between the use of English and the blogger's geographic location (in or outside her or his country) or a transnational perspective. In line with Etling et al.'s (2009) above-mentioned observations, our list of popular blogs held only one or two blogs per blogosphere that could be labeled more transnational than national (in fact, often local) in terms of blogging content. For example, three Lebanese bloggers were living in North America, but only Angry Arab blogged consistently about pan-Arab or transnational issues—the others focused on Lebanon. This was so for Kuwaiti and Egyptian blogs as well: One or two bloggers were based abroad, but this did not necessarily entail blogging either in English or more about transnational themes.

In 2010, a few of our bloggers (Angry Arab, Trella, Wael Abbas, 3Arabawy) had achieved regional notoriety and were known to Western digital activists and media organizations. That said, most bloggers' interview responses to the question of which Arab bloggers they followed or interacted with evinced little

⁷One trend appears to be increased use of Arabic in blogs as the available software for Arabic becomes accessible (cf. el-Nawawy & Khamis 2013, 66); indeed, after 2011 some Egyptian English language bloggers (Traveller within and 3rabalawy) switched to Arabic.

regional interconnectedness, aside from statistical knowledge of their Western and Arab readers. The paucity of transnational pan-Arab themes in the blogs indicates that local-transnational connections cannot be taken for granted, although the Arab uprisings certainly increased bloggers' interest in what was happening in other parts of the region. Even the more common transnational themes during the study period, such as Western popular culture (e.g., films, music, IT software, restaurant reviews), were often discussed within local contexts (see below).

Table 1. Lebanese, Egyptian, and Kuwaiti Top Bloggers, 2010.

Lebanese Blogs	Egyptian Blogs	Kuwaiti Blogs
As'ad AbuKhalil,* "Angry Arab." www.angryarab.blogspot.com	Wael Abbas, "al-Wa'y al-Mis'ri." www.misrdigital.blogspot.com Interviewed March 27, 2011.	Nasser al-Qatami,* "Loft 965." www.loft965.com
Elias Muhanna, "Qifa Nabki." www.qifanabki.com/ Interviewed via Skype, January 29, 2011.	Abdel Moneim Mahmoud, "Anā Ikhwān" [I am a Muslim Brother]. http://www.ana-ikhwan.blogspot.com Interviewed March 27, 2011.	Anonymous ("Nic," "Shoosh"), "Shooshness." http://www.shooshness.blogspot.com/ Interviewed January 9, 2012.
Liliane Assaf, "Independence 05," renamed "From Beirut with Funk" in September 2010. http://blog.funkyozzi.com/ Interviewed November 22, 2010.	Ahmed Shokeir, "Late Night Stories." http://www.shokeir.blogspot.com Interviewed via Skype, June 14, 2011.	Khaled Al Zamel, "3Erzela." http://www.3erzala.blogspot.se, http://www.k-area.com/ (moved September 28, 2011). Interviewed January 9, 2012.
Maya Zankoul, "Maya's Amalgam." http://www.mayazankoul.com Interviewed November 24, 2010.	Ashraf Al-Anany, "Sinā Haythu Anā" [Sinai is where I am]. www.alanany.wordpress.com Interviewed March 28, 2011.	Anonymous ("AyyA"),* "TheUltimate." http://3asal.wordpress.com/
Waleed Zoghby, "Hummus Nation." http://www.hummusnation.com Interviewed via Skype, December 9, 2010.	Nawara Negm, "Jabhat at-tahyīs ash-sha'biyya" [Popular Front for Raving]. www.tahyyes.blogspot.com Interviewed March 28, 2011.	Abdulazeez Al Ateeqi, "ExZombies: The Art of Madness." http://www.exzombie.blogspot.com/ Interviewed via Skype, April 27, 2012.
Hani Naim, "Hanība'l yatasakka' fi-l-'arjā'" [Hanibaael loafing about the grounds]. hanibaael.wordpress.com Interviewed November 26, 2010.	Hossam el-Hamalawy, "3Arabaway." www.arabawy.org Interviewed, 29 March 2011.	Marzouq Al-Ghanim, "Zdistrict." www.zdistrict.com Interviewed January 11, 2012.

Assaad Thebian, "Kharbashāt Bayrūtiyya" [Beirut Scribbles]. http://beirutiyat.me/ Interviewed June 1 and November 25, 2010.	Marwa Rakha.* "Egyptain Fe-Mail" http://www.marwarakha.com , or http://marwarakha.blogspot.com/ .	Abdul Mohsin Mohammad, "Frankom." www.frankom.com/ Interviewed January 12, 2012.
Imad Bazzi,* "Mudawwanat Trīlā" [Trella's blog]. www.trella.org	Mahmoud Salem, "Sandmonkey." http://www.sandmonkey.org . Interviewed, 30 March 2011.	Reem Alshammari, "Chillout Kuwait." http://chilloutkuwait.blogspot.com/ Interviewed January 8, 2012.
Rami Fayoumi, "+961." www.plus961.com/ Interviewed in Beirut, November 25, 2010.	Anonymous ("Zenobia"), "Egyptian Chronicles." http://www.egyptianchronicles.blogspot.com . Interviewed in Cairo, 29 March 2011.	Anonymous ("Jacqui"), "Couch Avenue." www.couchavenue.com . Interviewed, 10 January 2012.
Tony Saghbini, "Saghbini"/"Ninār." saghbini.wordpress.com Interviewed November 24, 2010.	Mohamed El Dahshan. www.travellerwithin.com . Interviewed, 30 March 2011.	Amer Al-Hilal, "Hilaliya: A Kuwaiti Blogging Community." http://www.hilaliya.com Interviewed January 11, 2012.

*Not interviewed.

In all three contexts, bloggers self-identified as part of an online national blogging community in which a degree of mutual respect, if not agreement, was awarded and expected. Bloggers' daily diet included reading, tweeting, and sometimes referring to or commenting on each other's blogs. Though ideological leanings clearly differed in each context, in all three blogospheres the majority identified themselves as liberal, leftist, or secular, in that order. In the interviews, all the bloggers were keen to emphasize their independence from mainstream media organizations. Similarly, few admitted to being members of any political party, NGO, or civil society organization, but almost all said they "cooperated" with such groups during elections, demonstrations, and campaigns, or for charity drives or workshops on public health issues.

National Blogging Contexts

The next three sections set out the national frameworks for these blogospheres, the boundaries of bloggers' freedom of speech, the bloggers' relationship to mainstream media, and the ways prevalent blogging themes relate to counterpublicness or cultural citizenship. These backdrops are then compared with the previous discussion about how to understand Arabic bloggers.

Activist Egypt

The Egyptian mediascape is dominated by state-owned mass media and privately owned outlets that enjoy good relations with the government. The authoritarian political system has long coexisted with a lively intellectual culture, sectarian tensions, and a respected religious orthodoxy. In the late 1990s, the increasing availability of satellite television brought with it a rise in controversial talk shows, which, along with a few oppositional publications, began to push the boundaries of established media discourse.

The most popular Egyptian bloggers included here are what Radsch (2008) has called first-generation bloggers. They are the architects and godfathers/mothers of blogging in Egypt, starting with either the Kefaya (Enough) movement in 2005 or the female anti-harassment campaigns in 2006. They are human rights activists and citizen journalists, criticizing government corruption and police torture, supporting minorities' rights, or tackling gender inequalities, not least the public sexual harassment of women. With just one Muslim Brotherhood supporter and one conservative Bedouin Sinai blogger in the sample, liberals, secularists, and leftists are disproportionately represented.

In 2010, at least half of the bloggers had relationships with news organizations or were originally journalists. Ana Ikhwan, one of the most famous Muslim Brotherhood bloggers during our period of study, left blogging when Al Jazeera hired him as a producer in January 2011. Vice versa, 3Arabawy worked for the *Los Angeles Times* before leaving mainstream journalism. A member of the Revolutionary Socialist Movement, he blogged about Egyptian workers' rights, death metal, and strikes and protests in Egypt and around the world. An economist, Traveller Within, freelanced for various Western newspapers and wrote for the (then) oppositional publication *al-Masry al-Youm*. Perhaps the most well-known blogger, who is known more by his real name than his blog ("Misrdigital"), is Wael Abbas. A former correspondent for Deutsche Presse Agentur, Abbas wrote a column for the (then) independent outlet *Al-Dostour* and freelanced for some Western presses. Last, Nawara Negm used to work as a journalist and translator for Egyptian state television and also wrote a regular column in *Al-Dostour*. Negm said she saw herself as a citizen journalist and found little difference between journalism and citizen journalism other than in tone. It is worth noting that in 2010 these bloggers were already incorporating an ever increasing number of social media platforms (Flickr, Twitter, Digg, Facebook) into their blogs.

Compared to users of the censored online media in Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, Egyptian bloggers enjoy unfiltered Internet (Abdulla, 2007). But unlike their Lebanese and Kuwaiti counterparts, Egyptian bloggers suffered periodic crackdowns, and many had been jailed, harassed, or intimidated—not only for "insulting" Islam or President Mubarak, but for activities such as reporting police brutality or corruption, or taking part in protest demonstrations (Hamdy, 2009). In these cases the authorities did not differentiate between Islamist and secular bloggers. *Reporters without Borders* therefore repeatedly deemed Egypt an "Internet enemy" in the years before the uprisings.

The blogging themes in 2009 and 2010 were domestically focused, though several dealt with bilateral relationships (Algeria–Egypt football riots, President Obama's Cairo speech, Egypt's relationship to Israel). Echoing el-Nawawy and Khamis' (2013, p. 196) findings about some of these same bloggers, the blogs studied here thematically documented and publicized human rights abuses and government

corruption, provided platforms for online discussion or self-reflection, and mobilized political awareness and protest. This fits with the notion of counterpublics, where protests and alternative media are used to make marginalized voices heard in the mainstream media. Meanwhile, many of these bloggers were themselves journalists or activist celebrities. They were role models, spoke at universities, won international awards, and attended transnational NGO meetings. Major Western news outlets used them as sources. Even before the toppling of Mubarak, they were generally recognized—internationally, if not nationally—as part of the “youth” opposition to Mubarak’s rule,⁸ despite their ideological discord regarding how to address Egypt’s problems.

A cultural citizenship perspective on this would instead draw attention to their modes of expression as Internet activists, their sources of inspiration, and their shared values favoring democratic modes of participation (Hermes, 2006). Thus, despite ideological disagreements between Wael Abbas and 3Arabawy, or the Islamic framework adopted by Ana Ikhwan in contrast to Sandmonkey’s secular stance, they all stood up for each other’s rights to express themselves freely and called for transparency and accountability, as well as social and cultural norms free of hypocrisy and discrimination. As in Hirschkind’s version of counterpublics, affective reasoning, personal moral standing, and shared values led them to agree on what type of rule they did not want. However, the bloggers studied here did not agree on how to express that opposition or what to do instead.

Several bloggers’ modes of expression and blogging themes clearly appealed to popular sentiment and culture. As to the modes, most of the bloggers employed informal conversational address. Four (Shokeir, Wael Abbas, Nawara Negm, and Sandmonkey) used various degrees of Bakhtinian carnivalesque and sarcasm as analogies for Egyptian rule. The former refers to profanity, indecorous language, and socially offensive comparisons in describing, for example, the Egyptian election procedures and voting system or a parliamentary debate on Chinese-made artificial hymens (Shokeir, “Porno Elections and Masturbation”; Sandmonkey, “Fuckin Hymens”⁹), and the latter to sarcastic commentary on religious hypocrisy and the failings of government (in Negm and Abbas, cf. Ramsay, 2012, p. 83). To be sure, not all bloggers viewed these drastic modes of expression favorably.

⁸Notably, our blogger Mahmoud Salem, aka Sandmonkey ran for parliament and lost in the first post-uprising parliamentary elections on November 28, 2011.

⁹An excerpt from Sandmonkey’s blogpost, October 31, 2009, a post now deleted from the blog, reads: “The Muslim Brotherhood, it seems, believes that Egyptian girls are super sluts who are only stopped from sleeping with anyone they meet in the street by their tiny hymens. . . . The crazy fuckheads (my pet name for misogynists everywhere) are not content that their ideology has put headscarves on the heads of 90% of Egyptian women. . . . Despite all of this, we at the Sandmonkey blog are supporting the effort started by Egyptian politicians to ban the fake hymens, as long as they ban real hymens with them. We would like a consistent hymen-banning policy, goddamn it. Or we would also like to have the males’ anal virginity to be inspected on the wedding night, with the wedding canceled and the groom killed if it has been found that he has experienced the pleasures of having his Hershey highway ridden. We would find it so so interesting to see how many such male honor killings would take place until men start decrying the whole thing as barbaric. Wouldn’t you?”

In their different ways, these bloggers drew on popular culture, mocking establishment figures and using everyday discourse to enact trajectories ranging from formal politics to social norms about gender discrimination. Gender equality was important to many of them, though Marwa Rakha was the only feminist blogger in the sample. Rakha offered her brand of feminism by working through various media as a relationship therapist. Her blog documents inequalities in personal relationships, which she often connects to social norms in Egyptian and Arabic culture.¹⁰ A cultural citizenship perspective takes into account how popular cultural and personal expressions differ as well as how they both relate to public political discourse, without fixating them as groups in relation to mainstream Egyptian or transnational public spheres.

Civil Society Lebanon

The Lebanese blogosphere of 2010 looked quite different from its appearance during the explosive growth period after the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri, the ensuing "Independence Intifada" in 2005, and the Hizbullah–Israel War in 2006. The Lebanese blogosphere fluctuates according to cyclical crises that provide impetus for many short-lived blogs. By 2010, the most popular blogs had mainly been started after 2007. Being in their mid to late twenties, the Lebanese bloggers were younger than their Kuwaiti and Egyptian counterparts as well as less politically activist than previous generations of Lebanese bloggers. In this context, note the divergent paths taken by two first-generation Lebanese bloggers: whereas Angry Arab continued his brand of sarcastic pan-Arab leftist punditry, Independence 05 tired of political issues, renamed her blog "From Beirut with Funk," and called it a commentary on social issues in Lebanon.¹¹

In interviews, the bloggers said the use of Arabic was a conscious strategy to reach out to fellow Lebanese who were not necessarily blog readers. This is unsurprising, as four out of the five Arab-language bloggers were social media activists or journalists (Riegert & Ramsay, 2013) who had previously worked for NGOs or as freelance journalists for the two main Lebanese leftist newspapers. The English-language blogger As`ad AbuKhalil (Angry Arab) wrote a regular column for the anticolonial, left-leaning *Al-Akhabar*. Angry Arab and Qifa Nabki were both political blogs, whereas the other three Beirut-based English blogs were not primarily political. Maya's Amalgam, +961 and From Beirut with Funk mixed everyday life observations and popular culture with political, social, and cultural commentary. During the time period studied, many vote-monitored the June 2009 election, and took part in demonstrations for non-confessional political reform, and Blog Earth Day. The pervasive use of humor, satire, and sarcasm as tools to critique businesses and social power structures was an important characteristic of the writing of popular bloggers who were not primarily activists (Riegert & Ramsay, 2013).

In interviews, the Lebanese bloggers said they blogged because the mainstream "sectarian" media did not reflect opinions like theirs. Most expressed the feeling that bloggers were ignored, marginalized, or made suspect (i.e., by the police). Though Lebanon had a system of media censorship,

¹⁰ She writes for the magazines *Identity*, *Campus*, *Enigma*, and *In(sight)*, has a radio show, and writes for Global Voices online.

¹¹Significantly, the blogger Liliane also maintains the Lebanon Aggregator.

sanctions for breaking rules were not systematic or necessarily enforced.¹² Instead, bloggers referred to a subtle set of taboos corresponding to various "sensitivities." These ranged from questioning Hizbullah's right to bear arms and exposing domestic violence and racial discrimination to critiquing the president, religious doctrines, and so on. One theme uniting the bloggers in the study period was criticism of the sectarian media ownership and content, and support for a non-confessional reform of the Lebanese political system. Common themes in both Arabic and English included the treatment of foreign workers, gender discrimination, sexist and sectarian advertising, environmental issues, collapsing infrastructure, and political and business corruption, along with tips on fund-raising activities, restaurants, and popular culture.

Compared to Egypt, some Lebanese bloggers was more oriented to transnational themes like global warming and the Palestinian issue. However, except for Angry Arab, none of the Lebanese bloggers were as well known or well connected to media organizations as their Egyptian counterparts, even if their blogs helped promote media careers after our study period. For example, several of these bloggers were later given space in mainstream media as talk show hosts or popular magazine writers, in addition to those who interspersed stints at NGOs with freelance journalism. Taken as a whole, they could be considered *ad hoc* or *incidental* counterpublics, with Arabic-language bloggers being more politically activist than those writing in English. Some bloggers focused on politicians and sectarianism, whereas others were more concerned with harmful social norms, cultural events, or criticism of businesses.

Reframing Lebanese bloggers as cultural citizens reveals that their different activities of social satire, advertising criticism, and activism stemmed from common values and similar critiques of Lebanese society. On the spectrum of these bloggers' civil-society trajectory, some self-identified as activists, whereas others were more concerned to change social norms and attitudes. Along this spectrum, blogging was a tool that some of these individuals used to establish social media personas. Illustrator Maya Zankoul saw popular culture, political and social commentary, and activism as interconnected aspects of the same social persona. Zankoul had a comic strip blog critiquing, among other things, the sexist and self-absorbed social behavior of the middle class. Similarly, Rami's (+961) blogposts skewered questionable business practices and unacceptable social behavior (found under the rubric: What the Fuck!), Hummus Nation subjected the Lebanese authorities to visceral Bakhtinian mockery, and Qifa Nabki offered a low-key "Qnion" satire section. They did not identify themselves as activists, but readers understood that these individuals could just as easily join an equal rights demonstration, monitor elections, or work for an NGO social media platform.¹³

¹²Since 2012, censorship and physical abuse has been on the rise. See <http://en.rsf.org/lebanon-military-court-sentences-reporter-06-12-2013,45548.html>

¹³Jurkiewicz (2012, pp.101. fn269) documented connections between NGOs and some of our bloggers: Kharbasha Beirut (Assad), Hanibaael, and Tony Saghbini. Saghbini said in a later meeting (2012) with me that he had previously worked for IndyAct. None worked for an NGO at the time of our interviews.

Consumerist Kuwait

The memory of the Iraqi invasion in 1990 is still a “defining characteristic of everyday life” in Kuwait and explains early government investment in digital communication and the speedy development of an “Internet culture” (Wheeler, 2006, p. 79). This culture is characterized by high per capita income, a “techno-consumerist” outlook that confers status on those with the latest gadgets, and the enthusiasm of the Kuwaiti press (ibid., pp. 39–48). Compared to its Gulf neighbors, Kuwait had more constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression, and its elected parliament voiced real opposition. However, its press laws made it illegal to criticize the ruling emir’s family or Islam or to publish content deemed harmful to public morality (i.e., pornography). Internet filtering was applied to enforce these laws, and offending Kuwaiti websites were blocked. In addition, the Islamist bloc in parliament actively campaigned to restrict media content deemed inappropriate, such as the TV show *Star Academy* (Kraidy, 2007b). The government and major parliamentary groupings (the liberals, the Islamists, and tribes) owned various news outlets. Self-censorship was widely practiced due to “a public ethic against openly voicing political opinions outside of trusted social collectives, such as mosques or diwaniya/parlor visits” (Wheeler, 2006, p. 52). Through its affordance of anonymity, the Internet was thus initially greeted as a free space to express opinions that also allowed for unsupervised communication between the sexes.

Blogging as political activism reached its pinnacle with the Nabihah Khamsah (We Want Five) campaign, touched off by a constitutional succession crisis in 2005/2006, and the airing of charges of political corruption and vote-buying. An alliance of respected journalists, anonymous blogs, Web forums (including a cyber-active member of the ruling family), and the youth movement succeeded in reducing the number of electoral districts from 25 to five (Dashti, 2009). Also, women’s receiving the right to vote in 2005 was partly due to successful online electioneering, and four women got elected to parliament in May 2009. The interviewed top bloggers all supported female voting rights, and most posted the historical landmark of the four new women parliamentarians with pride.

Bloggers and online journalists thus were credited with raising the ceiling on discussions of nepotism and corruption, and pushing citizenship rights for women. However, the paradoxical effect of an Internet-savvy Kuwaiti populace was that media organizations, politicians, and businesses all went online. According to the interviews, by 2010 this had made blogging—previously a “free” space with a critical political edge—a place where “everyone” was; therefore much political and social critique had moved to Twitter.¹⁴ Bloggers saw two results: they felt they couldn’t be as open when people they knew were online, and they realized that political content was not popular. What got hits instead were posts like 3Erzala’s letter telling the shoe company Toms that “pig skin” shoes were not going to sell in the Arab world. Couch Avenue, 3Erzala, and Frankom bloggers were concerned that the blogosphere had become superficial, money had corrupted bloggers, and media organizations, businesses, and politicians were running fake blogs. All the bloggers said they had personally been approached by politicians or businesses wanting to promote ideas and products through their blogs. Most refused such offers.

¹⁴This was formulated by 3Erzala, but most of the other interviewed bloggers offered similar opinions. The Kuwaiti government’s energetic pursuit of offending “tweeps” since 2011 testifies to this move. <http://advocacy.globalvoicesonline.org/2011/11/04/kuwait-more-twitter-users-arrested>

Kuwait's smaller size and the presence of influential actors online differentiate this blogging context from its Egyptian and Lebanese counterparts. The popular Kuwaiti bloggers were mainly first-generation Kuwaiti bloggers and had an average age of 31, but unlike the Egyptians, they were not activists or engaged in the youth movement. The bloggers of Kuwait did not aspire to be journalists, though "Jacqui" and Amer Al-Hilal worked as columnists for *Al-Watan* and the *Arab Times*. Furthermore, although the bloggers knew each other through the Safat blogging union and mentioned each other in their blogs, Kuwaiti social norms prohibited unrelated men and women from mixing. This kept the women from attending blogging meetings until they began to be held in malls or organized by businesses.

Overall, Kuwaiti blogs in the 2009–2010 period exhibit a consumerist trajectory, though they also evince civil-society aspects reminiscent of the Lebanese context. Involvement in fundraisers and good causes was common to both during this time period, but the Kuwaiti context included no NGOs, demonstrations, or protests. Kuwaiti bloggers did, however, report that they had voted in 2009 and encourage readers to do the same. Blogging themes were mainly domestically oriented, even if some blogs featured consistent transnational themes about popular culture, environmental issues, or religious hypocrisy. The focus was typically on personal stories involving corruption, poor business practices or the performance of state companies, and on reviews of restaurants, movies, television shows, IT gadgets, and sports. Some blogs mixed this with critique of parliamentary politics and religious hypocrisy. Film reviews often complained about draconian censorship (Zdistrict, Couch Avenue). Four of the five English-language blogs (Loft 965, Couch Avenue, Zdistrict, and Chillout Kuwait) were devoted to everyday life and popular culture. Here and there, these raised awareness about Human Rights Day (Loft 965), a new restaurant's recycling program (Chillout), and bad service by a large telecom (Zdistrict and Couch Avenue). Two Arabic-language bloggers, Ex-Zombiesm and TheUltimate were the most outspoken, raising taboo subjects such as sexual issues or religious hypocrisy in the quest for power. Frankom, 3Erzala, and Hilaliya tended to mix everyday life with societal critique, political (parliamentarian) and business corruption, and problems in the school and health care systems, all in the name of Kuwaiti patriotism.

The Kuwaiti bloggers appeared to share modern, liberal (not leftist) values. They oppose censorship, religious hypocrisy, and gender discrimination. However, aside from congratulating the new women parliamentarians, complaining about broadband speed and prices, and marking the anniversary of the Iraqi invasion, the bloggers seldom blogged about similar subjects in 2009 and 2010. Three of the four female bloggers wrote little of politics, and two said in interviews they actively avoided it. Even so, in a cultural citizenship perspective, a consumerist trajectory, seen as lifestyle choices, could easily interpret what they are doing as political. Enacting cultural citizenship means empowering readers to work for a better Kuwait by reviewing events and IT products; reporting on poor business practices, failures of the health care system, and state bureaucracy; or fundraising for undocumented children with cancer. As was pointed out in some interviews, critique of businesses could have serious consequences, as in the case of a famous blogger sued by an international franchise over a bad restaurant review.¹⁵

¹⁵The Japanese restaurant Benihana sued one of the most popular Kuwaiti bloggers (<http://248am.com/>), who is not included here because he is a Lebanese national.

As cultural citizens, the bloggers empowered themselves and others in key aspects of everyday life in Kuwait by commenting on and critiquing different sectors of society. They cannot be said to have been a counterpublic where common issues were debated or discussed, but they did identify with fellow bloggers, keep their distance from would-be financiers, contribute to charities, vote, and engage in raising consciousness. For some, this meant alternating between reviewing popular culture and encouraging Arab feminism, whereas others ruminated on the nature of atheism and religious education. These atomistic practices speak to cultural citizenship as a fruitful way to understand their performances as civically oriented.

Conclusion

Comparing blogging themes and trajectories in several national contexts reveals how a country's political system, social norms, and mediascape shape blogging trajectories. Despite their otherwise cosmopolitan attitudes and lifestyles, only one or two bloggers in each context was thematically transnational. In most cases, even Western popular culture was domesticated to fit local lifestyles or specific forms of civic engagement, or to express liberal opinions about social norms. Kuwaiti popular bloggers' use of consumer critique to point to societal ills may be due to greater social control and Internet policing, or to the fact that these bloggers are neither aspiring journalists nor activists. More work is needed to see whether this is also true of other Arab contexts, that is, whether a consumerist or political trajectory would be a natural outlet for cultural citizenship in a more restrictive mainstream media environment than that of Kuwait. The political trajectory of Egyptian bloggers in this study played out in a context where demonstrations, protests, and strikes were everyday occurrences. More consistent civic participation and the making of common cause are the hallmarks of counterpublicness. For these people blogging was a first step into public participation, and the cultural and political capital they gained from blogging built networks of credibility that have extended to other platforms in the Arab media ecology.

Cultural citizenship builds on acculturation, where everyday online experience habituates participants into different forms of public interaction—and where the private sphere is no longer so private. Observers have often highlighted how digital media tend to affect the boundaries between public and private in ways that support a more individualistic form of citizenship. However, these bloggers' online experience also acculturated them to shared values: the right to access information freely, the right to publicize one's own views, and the need to respect those with different views (Hofheinz, 2011). It also trained them to debate and defend personal values in relation to the community through affective reasoning and personal ethical stances (Hirschkind, 2006). These are some central characteristics of cultural citizenship as previously defined. However, as Papacharissi warns, this does not necessarily lead to a livelier public sphere or greater democracy. "The unique contribution of blogs lies not in enabling the public good, but rather in challenging the premises on which it rests" (2010, p. 149).

Although Arab blogs clearly challenge political, economic, and religious authorities, the process is ongoing and takes different directions according to the balance of forces in societies. Both entertainment and information are resources for individuals' identity-building and forms of expression, feeding deeply held needs to know, speak, and build community with like-minded others. These drivers of digital cultural citizenship may be conceived as conditions that can develop into coherent counterpublics and will be

around when the counterpublics dissolve into new alignments in today's volatile Arab new media environment.

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