

New Clicks in the Arab World

Bloggers Challenge Longtime Cultural, Political Restrictions

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JIDDAH, [Saudi Arabia](#) -- When he was a college student in Washington state, Saudi Arabia's most popular blogger, Fouad al-Farhan, donned a T-shirt emblazoned with "Animal Rights Equals Human Rights" and slept on the campus lawn during a hunger strike protesting the slaughter of foxes.

That type of freedom during six years in the United States gave Farhan a taste for expressing himself that he was unable to satisfy when he returned to Saudi Arabia in 2001.

"You can't write whatever you want in the newspaper here; you can't even lift up a poster in protest," said Farhan, 31, a computer programmer who attended Eastern Washington University in Spokane. "On the blog, it's a different world. It was the only way to express myself the way I wanted."

Farhan is part of a growing wave of young Arabs who have turned to blogging to bypass the restrictions on free expression in a predominantly authoritarian, conservative and Muslim region. Blogging is so novel here that the equivalent term in Arabic, *tadween*, to chronicle, was coined only this year. But it has spread rapidly among the increasingly urban youth and in the process has loosened the limits of what's open for discussion.

Activists have used their blogs to organize demonstrations and boycotts, and to criticize corruption and government policies. The less politically inclined have turned them into forums for heated debates on religion and a place to share personal stories and sexual fantasies.

"Several years ago, Arabic blogs in the Middle East could be counted on one hand," said Haitham Sabbah, Middle East editor of Global Voices Online, a media project sponsored by the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard Law School. "Today, they are in the thousands and are becoming a new source for news and information."

Though only about 10 percent of people in the Arab world have Internet access, the rate continues to rise dramatically, having multiplied fivefold since 2000, according to Internet World Stats, a Web site that tracks Internet usage and related information.

The number of bloggers in Saudi Arabia has tripled since the beginning of the year, reaching an estimated 2,000.

Young women make up half the bloggers in the kingdom, one of the most traditional countries in the world, where women are forced to dress modestly and are not allowed to drive cars or travel without permission from a male guardian. Lured by the possible anonymity of the medium, Saudi women have produced a string of blogs filled with feminist poetry, steamy romantic episodes and rants against their restricted lives and patriarchal society.

But with the medium's growing clout and appeal in the Arab world, the inevitable crackdown has followed. At least six Egyptian bloggers were jailed for a time earlier this year, and several blogs in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia have been blocked by the state-owned bodies that control Internet access.

Last month, Abdullah al-Jasir, an official at Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Culture and Information, described electronic media as "dangerous" and said Arab countries would meet in the Saudi capital, Riyadh, in December to find ways to monitor the Internet, according to the Saudi-owned pan-Arab *al-Hayat* newspaper.

As a counterbalance, bloggers have sought strength in numbers, and in their community. When the blog of prominent Bahraini activist Mahmood al-Yousif was blocked last month for publicizing a government corruption scandal, bloggers in Bahrain, [Egypt](#) and Saudi Arabia spread the word on their blogs and urged people to sign a petition addressed to the Bahraini government.

Though Persian Gulf countries routinely block access to sites that are pornographic, are run by dissidents or discuss terrorism or drugs, the blogosphere is difficult to police. Within hours, Yousif's blog was up again, at another location.

The new technology has also made it possible to do virtually what one cannot do physically in a country such as Saudi Arabia, an absolute monarchy that bans public gatherings, political parties and civil rights groups, and restricted last year's limited municipal elections to men.

A Carefully Worded Charter

This month, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Bloggers, founded by Farhan and a group of his friends, will post their charter online and open membership to male and female bloggers. Members will then vote for a president, male or female, and make amendments to the charter by majority vote. Meetings will be held online.

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To hammer out kinks in the charter, Farhan and six of his friends several weeks ago rented a conference room by the hour. Ahmed al-Omran, one of the first Saudi bloggers, had flown in from Riyadh, where he is a pharmacy student. It was the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, when many people stay up late and sleep away the fasting hours, and Farhan called the meeting to order a little before midnight.

The first snag came early, when Farhan read out the clause banning criticism of the world's three major religions.

Yousuf Omar, nicknamed the King of Mac for his love of Macintosh computers, wanted all references to religion deleted from the charter. Wearing the long traditional white robe, his hair in a ponytail, Omar said the group should not draw attention to religion. With a show of hands, the majority agreed.

A stickier topic quickly followed.

"What about erotica, like Mystique writes?" Farhan asked, referring to the best-known Saudi female blogger. "If she gets blocked, do we get involved?"

"What's the erotica like?" asked Bandar Raffa, a 29-year-old graphic designer.

"I don't approve -- it's quite racy," Farhan said, then smiled. "But it's good reading."

The group decided that whoever was elected president and the executive committee would look into these issues, case by case.

It was close to 2:30 a.m. when the group filed out of the conference room, exhausted and a little elated.

Finding Inspiration in Islam

Farhan, whose blog is the most widely read in Saudi Arabia, said he derives his democratic ideals from his religion. Political reform, he said, must come from within Islam.

His ever-present PowerBook laptop by his side as he sipped coffee in a large restaurant with a cathedral ceiling, Farhan explained that Muslim thinkers hundreds of years earlier had pushed for more freedom of expression, and checks and balances, than exist in the Arab world today.

In his blog, Farhan pounces on the government for failing to keep its promises and criticizes senior officials, many of whom he has labeled dinosaurs out of touch with the country's young population.

In a country where reformists, journalists and human rights lawyers are sometimes jailed for criticizing the government, activists run the risk of government harassment.

But Farhan and Omran, the pharmacy student, among the minority of Saudis who blog under their real names, say the risk is offset by the credibility it adds to their voices.

And Farhan often uses humor to lessen the sting of his unusually daring rebukes.

On prominent display on his blog is a link to statements by government officials, one in 2002 and one in 2006, both promising an end to unemployment within five years. A ticker on his site counts down, "1,629 days left till unemployment is eradicated in Saudi Arabia."

A little farther down is a poll.

"Do you trust the government?"

About 60 percent of the 280 respondents said they did not.

But Farhan's push for free expression stops at the doorstep of blogs like Mystique's with their explicit sexual content. "I respect her right to blog," he said. "But I don't think I will stand up for or defend what she writes. My definition of freedom does not cover the type of content she writes."

Eroticism and Freedom

When the woman who blogs anonymously under the name Mystique finally shows up for an appointment at Starbucks on trendy Tahlia Street, she seems used to causing a stir. Heads turn when the 23-year-old walks into the coffee shop minus the mandatory head scarf worn by most Saudi women, her caramel-colored hair cascading past her shoulders. She is wearing a black cloak with a shiny copper-colored print on the sleeve, a black Prada purse slung over her shoulder.

She orders a Frappuccino, then sits down to talk. "I've been in touch with my sexuality ever since I was 13," she said. "Why shouldn't I write erotic fiction? It's one way of expressing myself."

In one episode of a long-running romantic serial, the police come upon her and her boyfriend in the car as they are about to make love in a secluded spot by the beach. In another, she recounts her real-life experience at a local store that sells sex paraphernalia under the counter.

But Mystique has received the most scathing criticism for her feminist poetry and religious comments. A question posted on her blog -- "How imperfect can a perfect Creator be?" -- garnered dozens of angry missives calling her an apostate who is besmirching her country's reputation.

"Sometimes I push. I want to show that women are oppressed," she said. The situation "is not normal. I would like people to see that."

Omran, 23, like many young bloggers, said he hoped that blogging would speed up the country's glacial pace of reform. Sometimes he is afraid, not knowing whether he had crossed a line, but he continues to blog, eager for change, democracy and more personal freedoms, he said.

"I want our society to move forward, and I want to be part of that change," Omran said. "I don't want to be 40 and still struggling with the issues we're dealing with now."

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