Bloggers and the Blogosphere in Lebanon & Syria
Meanings and Activities

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**I would like to dedicate this thesis to my mum and dad,
Nada Taki and Toufic Taki.**

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis I have presented for examination for the PhD degree at the University of Westminster is my own work.

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ABSTRACT

The use of blogging and its potential effects on society and politics have been widely debated but the meanings and understandings that bloggers themselves hold about the activity have not been sufficiently explored; indeed in Lebanon and Syria they have barely been investigated at all. Through interviews with bloggers, ISPs, Internet café owners and others, as well as informal online participant observation and an online questionnaire, this thesis explores the structural and cultural variables that have allowed Lebanese and Syrian bloggers to understand and use blogs in their own specific ways. The study not only recounts what bloggers say about themselves but investigates the structural variables that surround them, including government and institutional policy, censorship, impediments to Internet access, historical conditions under which blogging emerged, attitudes to the Internet, changing events and new entrants to blogging. By its comparative nature, the project reveals how the meanings that bloggers attach to their blogging activities and to their socialization with other bloggers are situated in the social and historical conditions under which blogging is practiced. The changing meanings blogging acquired for bloggers during the course of this research illustrated its shifting and relational attributes. Thus an unexpectedly complex array of interrelated factors is shown to contribute to the tool acquiring certain meanings and being used in specific ways. The research uncovers differing reasons between Lebanese and Syrian bloggers as to why they blog, what socialisation with other bloggers means to them, and what marks of differentiation such as anonymity and choice of language they use to distinguish the activity of one blogger from another. Both the Lebanese and Syrian bloggers at this point belong to a collective effort of other bloggers in their own countries, but the thesis also shows the meanings of socialisation online and how it is regarded change over time.

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1.1 Background

Since 2005, weblogs in the Arab world have received a great deal of coverage in both the Western and Arab press (see for example Abu Zaid 2006, El Kazen 2006, Zaki 2008). In these articles, weblogs are often compared and contrasted to the Arab mainstream media, which are for the most part, either state controlled, censored, or sponsored by politicians. In sharp contrast to the mainstream media and based on the technological potentialities of the Internet, anonymity being the most evident example, weblogs are deemed to offer a space where users can escape the boundaries and ideologies of the dominant social, cultural and political milieus, resulting in voices not often reported on being brought to the fore. Due to the activities of a select number of bloggers, the media coverage of Arab bloggers has been highly optimistic, and in some instances, generated hurried and exaggerated statements about their potential impact. And it has focused on a particular type of blogging practice - challenging authoritarian states or using blogs in times of war and unsettled periods - and on a type of blogger - young, active, secular and political.

Academic literature on Arab weblogs has centred on the potential of this new medium with regard to various prospects of democratization. As discussed in Chapter 5, the main themes this literature has covered have included the potential of political blogging in changing the status quo (see for example Isherwood 2008, Radsch 2008); the mobilization of bloggers during specific events (see for example Faris 2010, Ward 2007); and the censorship of blogs and the imprisonment of bloggers (see for example Shanti and Taylor 2003). The above literature was rarely supported by empirical evidence[1] and was largely based on the content produced by bloggers rather than on interrogating the blogger.

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[1] The sole exception is a large scale empirically informed study on Arab blogs conducted by the Berkman Centre for Internet and Society (Etling et al, 2009) which content analysed blogs against a social network analysis of the Arabic language blogosphere. See Chapter 5 for a more detailed description of this research and other literature on Arab blogs.

Similarly, the impact of weblogs on politics has been heavily debated in Lebanon and Syria and reported on in the media but not sufficiently explored academically and empirically. Perhaps due to the fact that growth in the number of Syrian blogs is very recent, the only study on Syrian blogs is a BA dissertation (Standish 2009). Through the method of content analysis of bloggers' posts in 2008, this dissertation questioned whether the Syrian regime rhetoric dominates political self-expression on blogs. Lebanon's bloggers featured extensively in the press during the 2005 Cedar Revolution and the 2006 war with Israel[2] and in some academic papers (Ward 2007, Haugbolle 2007). Yet, as far as I'm aware, only one MA thesis (Saab 2007) investigated Lebanese blogs through an online questionnaire. That thesis focuses on blogs as arenas for political deliberation, especially during the 2006 war on Lebanon. These conceptions of blogging have focused on its use as an 'oppositional' or 'alternative' medium in a particular point in time and have thus ignored the other possibilities for using blog, the diverse and changing composition of bloggers and the often changing meanings associated with blogging.

In 2005 I completed an MA dissertation on blogging in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. By sending a questionnaire to bloggers residing in the abovementioned countries, I gained insight into the diverse ways in which bloggers understood their blogging practice and was interested in further exploring what blogging meant to bloggers in two contexts not yet sufficiently explored: Lebanon and Syria.   When I began the PhD thesis a year later, I observed that blogging activities had rapidly changed in a short period of time and that new and different ways of using the tool had become evident. I began to focus on understanding the factors surrounding bloggers' activities that influence why and how they blog. The literature emerging on blogging and the claims projected on blogs had an underlying tone that suggests *why bloggers should* be blogging rather than *why they actually do blog*. They struck me as technologically deterministic and centred on claims about blogging's potential through speculation, rather than through systematic empirical research.

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[2] The two events are discussed in Chapter 2.1.1: Lebanon – "Meanings" and "Perceptions" and again in Chapter 6.

The present research project aims to go beyond this and focus on the bloggers' point of view by asking them what blogging means for them, and how they understand it. However, it will not only recount what bloggers have to say about themselves and their activities, but rather, following Wacquant (1995: 491), it aims to reconstruct the bloggers' points-of-view, that is the contested and discrepant voices of bloggers that one can gather from the bloggers themselves, as well as the various symbolic and structural elements surrounding their activities. It investigates the bloggers' positionality (how they are positioned and how they position themselves) within the practices they talk about. And it takes into account issues of access, social inequalities, censorship, self-censorship, the roles of institutional and government policy and general attitudes regarding the use of the Internet in different communities.

Using the above framework, the PhD thesis explores the meanings and activities of bloggers in Lebanon and Syria. By 'meanings' I mean the attributes (significance, importance, triviality or value) that bloggers ascribe to their activities. However these activities are not always in line with the bloggers' aspirations. As Swidler (1986: 175) argues, "people may share common aspirations, whilst remaining profoundly different in the way their culture organises their overall patterns of behaviour". By situating their articulations within the various social structures, and keeping track of the blogging activities through long periods of change, the present research aims to examine the interaction and interplay of the factors that may influence why bloggers blog and how they blog.

1.2 Methodological Orientation

To understand the various perspectives of bloggers, a methodology was sought out that places emphasis on the bloggers' own interpretation of their activities yet without neglecting the importance of the wider contextual factors from which these bloggers' varied perspectives emerge. Most qualitative literature on blogging over the past six years has focused on the texts of bloggers, while attempts to understand blogging from a blogger's perspective were mostly carried out through surveys and

questionnaires. Few studies have interviewed bloggers face to face[3]. There have been many debates on how one should study computer-mediated communication. Questions have arisen on whether we should treat the Internet as a mere communication tool and study it as only a 'cultural artefact' or whether we ought to treat cyberspace as the only research reality and neglect the offline world in the process. Studies such as those conducted by Hine (2000) and Miller and Slater (2000) contested this split, placing emphasis on *both* the offline and online context of Internet practices. Following this, I sought to study bloggers through a method that merged both the online and offline.

During the first fieldwork session in March 2008, I decided to conduct face-to-face interviews with bloggers with a computer present and their blog on the screen. In this way, bloggers could guide me through their online activities themselves. They would explain, whilst demonstrating on the screen why they wrote specific posts, what their blog title means, who they link to, who they think visits their blog and whose blogs they read. This method I found allowed me to get a better grasp of the blogger in his or her entirety without privileging either the offline context or the online. More so, it allowed me to capture the extent of and type of socialisation online. Often unprompted, bloggers guided me to other blogs, referred to other bloggers' activities in relation to their own and attempted to describe other bloggers, analyse them and define them. In this respect, the methodology proved to be extremely beneficial as I began to make provisions for the fact that much of the socialisation online does not necessarily take the form of observable online interactions, such as comments, links or replies to discussions. Bloggers position themselves within and against certain other practices and there are often fluid and changing formations of groups and groupings. Mere observation of the content of blogs would not have allowed me to uncover how these bloggers position themselves, how they relate to each other and what group formations occur. This methodology, as well as other methods that supplemented it, such as informal online participant observation and an online questionnaire, are discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

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[3] Of the rare exceptions of studies that have interviewed bloggers face to face about their activities were: Brake 2009, Lenhart 2005 and Nardi et al 2004a.

My decision to research bloggers and blogging activities in Lebanon and Syria was initially based on a number of important factors. Firstly, my being a Lebanese national with the Arabic language as my mother tongue played a pivotal role in taking this decision. But more importantly the familiarity with the only slightly differing dialects in Syria and Lebanon proved to be a valuable asset in reading into the social idioms and slang that were used during personally conducted interviews and in the content of blogs. Moreover, while Lebanon and Syria have shared much historical and cultural dynamics, their contemporary history has resulted in completely different understanding and meanings attached to social and political systems. Lebanon and Syria were both part of Greater Syria under the Ottoman Empire. It was not until 1920, when the League of Nations Mandate divided the Ottoman territories between Britain and France, that Lebanon and Syria emerged as two mutually, exclusive autonomous countries. Since then, Lebanon has been under an unstable, confessionally-based, capitalist state where a power-sharing formula attempts (unsuccessfully) to resolve competition among the main religious groupings, and Syria is under a relatively stable, secular, self-declared "socialist", authoritarian regime. This has affected bloggers' sense of identity, moral sentiments, and the differing structural elements that surround them. This difference demarcates the importance of structural variables, and how they affect the respective user's understanding of blogging. In retrospect, the biggest benefit I have gained from the exploration of the two different sites, by using the same instruments of investigation, has been largely methodological. It has allowed me to pick up on themes and pay attention to details that if I had studied in only one location; I may have taken to be natural and taken for granted. The meanings that bloggers in Lebanon and Syria attach to certain markers of identification and the way they respond to others within the blogosphere differed in the more subtle nuances and their connotations.

While the socialisation of Lebanese and Syrian bloggers during the study has been largely nationally bounded, this is by no means a conclusive state (see Chapter 7 and 8). At the time of research there appeared a cluster of bloggers choosing to belong to the configuration of other bloggers in the same country because it is significant to them; however, these groupings may change over time. Amongst the clusters of national bloggers are 'expatriate' bloggers who still chose to belong to and participate in a Syrian and Lebanese blogosphere. While expatriate bloggers were

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included in the questionnaire sent out, their points of view on blogging were not as clearly drawn out, due to my interviewing only bloggers residing in Lebanon and Syria. Yet their participation has important implications for the blogosphere given that bloggers often compared and differentiated their activities, ideologies and practices to 'expatriate' bloggers. There are a number of factors that influenced why I did not to interview them. First for reasons of practicality it would have been difficult to reach bloggers abroad for face-to-face interviews. At the same time, setting clear distinctions on who is an expatriate and who is not was difficult. For example, Maya (SB1), one of the Syrian bloggers I interviewed twice, was studying in Beirut at the time of one of the interviews but had returned to Syria at the time of the second interview. Similarly Firas (LB6) was living in Lebanon at the time of the interview in 2008, but had started to blog when he had moved to Paris for his MA two years before. The evidence suggests that the majority of the expatriates who contribute to the Syrian and Lebanese blogosphere are those who go abroad short term and are still connected to their country of origin by regularly visiting[4]. Lebanese bloggers had explained that during the summer and Christmas breaks, the meetings they had offline with other bloggers would be twice as large due to the number of bloggers living abroad returning for the holidays (LB4, LB8). Similarly, one of the Syrian bloggers interviewed, who is in exile in Lebanon for his politically opposing views to the authorities, explained that Syrians abroad still face many of the structures that Syrians inside Syria do. He stated that 'Syrians abroad are still self-censoring politically taboo content because they know they will be going back to Syria at some point'. In the face of contemporary transnational dynamics, the debate on the definition of "Diaspora" is still under way (Tsagarousianou 2004). While it was not within the scope of the research to delve into what constituted diaspora bloggers and why they may be choosing to connect to a national blogopshere, it remains an important area of the Lebanese and Syrian blogosphere that deserves to be carefully explored in future projects.

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[4] According to the survey findings (N=66), approximately 48% of respondents from Lebanon and 36% in Syria studied outside of their own country for one of their two highest degrees

1.3 Theoretical Orientation

The meta-concepts of "identity" and "community" - insofar as they relate to the sense of self for bloggers and their socialisation with other bloggers - are central to this thesis. However, they are rethought in a manner that questions the normative connotations associated with them. The concept of Identity has been a subject of debate in Internet studies, particularly in discussions that address the potentialities of the Internet as a space where identities are fluid, users can appear anonymous, physical presence is dispensable and geographic boundaries are erased. The accounts bloggers gave me in interviews about themselves were not fragmented and multiple, as some literature on the Internet suggested, but rather whole, complete and embedded in their offline world. Rather than approaching identity through a perspective that points to the divergences and convergences between bloggers' online and offline identity, I study identities as I would in any space: as an array of strategic positions that bloggers negotiate at different points in time and in different contexts – whether online or not. In Chapter 2 I discuss the literature on identities, and in Chapter 6 I discuss various aspects of bloggers' identity in an attempt to answer the following questions: Why do bloggers choose to blog and which factors influence their blogging activities? How do they understand their blogging activities? How is anonymity used and for what reasons?

Whilst the concept of 'community' has been often used to describe socialization on the Internet, I have found the term to be ambiguous rather than a solid tool kit for the study of online interactions. Bourdieu's meta-theory of the 'field', as a framework, was beneficial in contributing towards an understanding of the different forces at play within the practice of blogging. In the event, the framework did not seem to fit in its entirety to the blogosphere; I could not ascertain whether a field existed and what its boundaries were. However, it allowed me to recognise the interactions of bloggers as necessarily relational, and to look for the effects that one action has on another and the hierarchies that exist within their practices. I discuss this theoretical framework in Chapters 2 and 8, while in Chapter 7 I attempt to answer questions relating to bloggers' socialisation online, such as: What is interaction like on blogs? What are its boundaries? And how do bloggers conceive of their audiences?

This investigation exposes a lacuna in the literature. Literature that conceptualizes or describes the micro everyday life of those living in contemporary Lebanon and Syria is minute. In Lindholm's (1995: 805) review of ethnographic work in the Middle East, he states that the few anthropological accounts that exist have historically focused on herdsmen or tribes. Recently, the most prevalent response to Edward Said's criticism of 'Orientalism' has left many anthropologists self-conscious about making theoretical and abstract generalizations. This, Lindholm argues (1995:818), has allowed for a retreat towards biography and narrative, leaving readers with little in terms of theorization. Indeed, only a handful of scholars have attempted to conceptualise what it means to be Syrian or Lebanese beyond the macro nation vs confession/tribe labelling and have often used lay or folk terms as analytical categories (see Chapter 2.2.1). These accounts have missed saying anything substantial on how the macro structures have affected the micro occurrences and vice versa. The lack of literature has confronted me with big challenges, as I have had to rely only on my primary data to explain certain patterns.

This lack of literature and my contextual approach to studying bloggers led me to take every opportunity to interview media practitioners, Internet cafe owners and users, Internet service providers (ISPs) and those working on internet development projects, during my fieldwork sessions as well as during frequent subsequent visits to Lebanon and Syria with the BBC World Service Trust (see Chapter 3.2.1). Informed by the work of Paul DiMaggio (2001, 2004), Brian Loader (1998) and other Internet sociologists, this study aims to examine inequalities in a more conclusive sense, which includes the different possibilities (impediments and opportunities) to using the Internet that individuals encounter in Syria and Lebanon. With regard to the Arab world, most vigorously debated is the question of state censorship. Whilst this is an important impediment to using the Internet, in some but not all Arab countries, there are other important factors, beyond a country's political system, that can determine how technologies are used and appropriated by people. Issues such as high rates of illiteracy, poor telecommunication systems, negative attitudes and lack of institutional support all contribute to the social, political and economic structures in which bloggers live. I discuss this in detail in Chapter 4.

The last chapter of the thesis, Chapter 8, discusses the perspective I arrived at to study bloggers in light of the principal findings. I conclude that an understanding of the local (offline) specificities of the bloggers' world is important because it over-determines if, why and how bloggers blog. However, as shown by examples cited in the chapter, the effects of these specificities on bloggers are not direct but are mediated in the blogosphere (which may have its own sets of meanings) and can thus only be analysed *in relation* to how they are understood by bloggers themselves. From this perspective I conclude by attempting answers to questions such as: what makes a blogger 'Lebanese' or 'Syrian'; what constitutes a blogosphere and what are its boundaries; and whether we can conceptualise the blogosphere through Bourdieu's concept of the 'field'.

Chapter II: Conceptual Framework

This thesis aims to find how bloggers feel about blogging, what it means for them, and how they interpret it. Yet it aims to achieve this goal without missing the importance of the wider contextual factors from which these bloggers' varied perspectives emerge. This chapter begins with exploring the meanings and understanding of social and political systems in Lebanon and Syria insofar as they are relevant to bloggers' motivations, sense of identity and socialisation with other bloggers. It examines and explores the complex and ambiguous identity formations on both the institutional level and the everyday micro level.

The next section examines literature on Internet inequalities and the digital divide and the importance of contextual variables in maintaining, increasing or decreasing these inequalities. It dissects the many variables – social, economic and political -that allow or hinder individuals to gaining 'effective' (Wilson 2000 cited in DiMaggio et al. 2001) access to the internet.

The meta-concepts of "Identity" and "Community", the two central themes that are pertinent to this research are examined in the next section. Within this broad canvas of literature, I situate my conceptual framework by reviewing Bourdieu's concepts of "Habitus" and "Field". The last section reviews literature relating to "identity" and "community" with regards to the study of computer-mediated communication. I try to posit how I apply these concepts in a workable fashion. Questions explored include the following: What are we referring to when we use the word identity and Community? What are the processes specific to the Arab world that have been theorized? What are the invocations that are used in Lebanon and Syria to mobilise individuals? How are these negotiated online?

2.1 Lebanon and Syria

2. 1. 1 Lebanon: Meanings and Perceptions

The meaning of what it is to be Lebanese has been a long battle of contested opinions. Is it a Lebanon that has existed as a by-product of colonial rule and is a detour from its larger origins, be it Greater Syria or a pan-Arab state. Or is it a Lebanon that has existed all through out time, distinctive and unique, as a result of an indigenous will (Hanf, 1993: 49). While the search for a historical and philosophical basis for Lebanese nationality continues, it is, in the main, by the day-to-day process of being Lebanese that the people of Lebanon still identify themselves as distinct (Salibi, 1971: 86, 1988) despite different nuances as to what it means[5].

Lebanon is perhaps one of the most complex and diverse countries in the world because of its geographic location[6] and its sectarian based political set-up. It was officially formed with its present borders in 1916[7] following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in World War One. Before that, it was one of the semi-autonomous provinces of "Greater Syria" that today would consist of the geographic region of Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, parts of Turkey and Iraq.

Lebanon gained independence from France in 1943 and had one of the most fragile turbulent histories in the Middle East. Distinctive from adjacent Arab countries for its relatively liberal tradition, it has been viewed with admiration for its freedom, diversity and high literacy rate yet at the same time as an alarming example of how a

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[5] While Lebanon was officially formed in 1916, a Lebanese identity had emerged before then. Lebanese historian, Kamal Salibi, writes that the idea of a Lebanese identity as separate and distinct from Greater Syria first came about during the 17th century when the region of Mount Lebanon became distinguished by its economic and social development. Salibi asserts that Tannus al-Shidyaq was the first historian to write a coherent history of Mount Lebanon in 1861, 'depicting the country as a feudal association of Maronites, Druzes, Melchites, Sunnites, and Shiites under the leadership of the Shihab emirs' (Salibi, 1971: 77). Yet it was the establishment of the Mutesarrifate of Mount Lebanon in 1861 within the Ottoman Empire and backed by European powers that gave the Lebanese identity, for the first time, a legal definition (ibid: 78).

[6] Lebanon has had continuous conflicts with its neighbours - Israel and Syria. Moreover, its strategic location as a crossroad between East and West means it often used as a strategic ally by bigger countries.

[7] The Sykes-Picot secret agreement in 1916 between France and Britain defined their spheres of influence. The provinces under the Ottomans that define Lebanon today were mandated to the French.

delicate interconfessional state in such a region suffers continuously from internal discord, civil unrest, surrounding conflicts and foreign interference.

Lebanon had and still maintains a consociational power sharing formula, which guarantees representation in political and administrative functions to different sects. The system developed by Arend Lijphardt (1977; 1990) is for states with internal divisions along ethnic, religious, or linguistic lines. Such a system has historical roots in Lebanon but it was the National Pact in 1943[8] that fully developed and legitimized the Lebanese political system of consociationalism in the hopes of alleviating tensions among Lebanon's religious sects, which were threatening the stability of the nation. The Pact allocated Christian and Muslim representation in parliament and the civil service according to a six to five ratio based on the 1932 demographic census[9] (Khazen, 1997). Preceding the 1975 civil war, Lebanon enjoyed a relatively stable period of economic growth. While it has had a history of divisions among different factions, sects and groups[10], as Khalaf (2001: 254) argues, the circumstances that lead to political violence were ever shifting – and not necessarily those that remained later in the same conflict. In other words, socio-economic struggles, cultural and psychological forces and legitimate grievance that instigated conflicts were all transformed into factional rivalry by leaders who awakened fragile sectarian sentiments to broaden the basis for mobilization (Khalaf, 2001: 255). These first sectarian disputes began in 1860 during the war between the Maronites and the Druze[11] in Mount Lebanon. The Maronites at the time allied with the French, and the Druze with the British. This was the beginning of a long lasting trend of sectarian factions in Lebanon creating support ties with bigger foreign countries.

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8 The 1943 National Pact is an unwritten subtext for the national constitution, based on an historic prime-ministerial declaration by Riad El-Solh in 1943. This declaration came after a period of intense, but not bloody, communal confrontation (Ziadeh, 2006, 111).

[9] A national census has not been conducted since that date due to the sensitivity of it revealing transformations in the religious balance

10 The bloody strife in1860 between the Druze and Maronites as example

[11] Maronites amake up the largest Christian community in the country. They follow the Eastern Catholic Church. The Druze are an offshoot of Islam and are found in Lebanon, Syria and Israel.

The conflicts of the 17-year civil war (1975-1990), that ended with the de facto agreement, which came to be commonly known as the Taif agreement[12], were not resolved. The consequences of the war not only created tensions amongst the different sects and a constant fear of being marginalized, assimilated into the 'other' groups, or exiled, but also completely altered the everyday social geography of Lebanon (Khalaf, 2001: 213, Khalaf, 1993: 28). There were massive population shifts, which ended with re-integration into homogeneous, self-contained and exclusive places based on sect (ibid).

Moreover, the war led to a destruction of virtually all common places in Lebanon beginning with downtown Beirut – Beirut's business centre, entertainment centre, the parliament quarters and the melting pot of Lebanese from all walks of life, religions, classes and regions. Most shops, banks, institutions and universities opened new branches in different areas and thus allowed them to become self-sufficient. The demarcation line, commonly known as the Green line, between West and East Beirut, never an artificial wall but a hazardous line with checkpoints, does not exist today. Yet it still holds emotional resonance for many dwellers of the city.

Post war public discourse centred on the political and ideological aspects of the different sects. There was a growing need to differentiate 'the other', especially after years of isolation and lack of interaction with them. Khalaf (2001: 268) asserts that the most distinctive features of Lebanon today are the "tendency first towards sectarian re-tribalization apparent in the reawakened communal identities and the urge to seek shelter in cloistered spatial identities". While kinship rather than state had always been the means of access to a variety of welfare and socio-economic services (Khalaf, 1971 cited in Khalaf, 2001: 227) this was greatly intensified after the war with the ever shifting allegiances between different factions, thus allowing for the family to be the only trusted source. People do not see themselves as having rights as a result of being citizens of a state. They perceive themselves as having rights because they are embedded in communities and in so far as these communities

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12 The National Reconciliation Accord' or 'Document of National Accord' was a document most commonly known as, and interchangeably called, the Taif Accords or the Taif Agreement, as it was signed in the city of Taif in Saudi Arabia. It was amended and included in the constitutional preamble in 1990. It presented a solution to the rules of governmental engagement among the increasingly semi-autonomous communities by splitting political power according to new demographic shifts in population and legitimizing the Syrian presence in Lebanon for a certain time frame.

are patriarchal or sectarian based, then their rights depend on their confessional affiliation (Joseph, 1993). The civil war sharpened the sectarian divisions in Lebanese society and also increasingly challenged any principal of common nationhood among the country's inhabitants. This had a significant impact on the interaction, or perhaps more accurately, the lack of interaction among the Lebanese. Discourse surrounding the other based on fear and suspicion were inflated and the conception of each community about the other was based largely on stereotypes.

While this isolation is not as apparent today for many members of the community and many people have everyday interactions with each other at work or other social events, yet the social geography of Lebanon has largely remained as it is. Khalaf (2001: 213) showed that, whereas the Christian to Muslim population of Mount Lebanon was 55% in 1975, it shrank to about 5% by the late 1980s – where the Christians migrated to other regions with a Christian majority. Similarly, the proportion of Muslims living in the Eastern suburbs of Beirut, which is today largely Christian, was reduced from 40% to about the 5% over the same period. This means that children go to schools with students of the same sect and may not have any interaction at all with their fellow Lebanese of other sects until university or adulthood. This lack of interaction or at least lack of engagement with other sects is especially significant on blogs as Lebanese from different backgrounds are writing about everyday life, politics and social issues from their personal perspective. Is this opening up something new and a peak into the lives and opinions of others that were not previously unattainable?

The most recent conflicts in Lebanon began in February 2005 following the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Demonstrations and protests were being held largely blaming Syria for the killing[13]. The series of protests calling for the withdrawal of Syria were successful in ejecting Syria's troops out of Lebanon and dubbed by the media as the Cedar Revolution. The partakers in these protests were the government backed coalition of several political parties, called the March 14th Alliance, led by Saad Hariri, son of Rafik Hariri and others united against the

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[13] Syria was seen as the culprit because of its continued military and intelligence presence in Lebanon. Just before the assassination Hariri had apposed Syria on its decision to extend the term of former Lebanese Present Emile Lahoud, an ally of Syria and therefore amend the Lebanese constitution causing a rift between the two.

Syrian presence in Lebanon. On March 8, shortly following the assassination, Hezbollah and its allies at the time, had also called for a protest accusing Israel and the United States for the assassination. The parties involved in the protest later formed a coalition called the March 8 forces. The March 8 alliance backed by the Iran/Syria axis, stands in opposition to the March 14th alliance currently backed by Saudi Arabia and the U.S.

The March 14 forces comprise the majority of the Sunni Muslims and a faction of the Christians supporting political leader Geahgeah. The Iran /Syria March 8 alliance, comprises the Muslim Shiites and the faction of the Christians supporting political leader Michel Aoun. As for the Druze, their alliance in 2005 was with March 14, but as of 2009 they shifted to the Syria/Iran axis. Political parties are largely based on sect in Lebanon but shift in alliances in time. Thus, individuals' assumed political affiliation and ideological stances are based on the religion they are born into. Moreover, full names can indicate region and religion.

The conflicts between the March 8 and March 14th alliances grew more extreme after the 2006 war on Lebanon. The war started when Hezbollah fired rockets at an Israeli patrol on Israel's side of the border fence, killing three Israeli soldiers and kidnapping two of them. Almost instantly, Israel retaliated resulting into a full-fledged war between the two sides, with Israel bombing Lebanese towns, villages and its infrastructure and Hezbollah firing back with rockets. The Lebanese were united against Israel's unmeasured retaliation that killed 1000 Lebanese civilians and displaced over one million, yet they were divided towards their support for Hezbollah. Following the war, those backing the March 14th coalition had become resentful of the large damage the war had caused to Lebanon's infrastructure, largely accusing Hezbollah of working on Iran/Syria's behalf rather than for the interest of the Lebanese. Those sided with the March 8th saw Hezbollah as the only strong defender of Lebanon. After the war, the March 14th and March 8th forces remained in a political deadlock for almost two years with their leaders unable to come up with a compromise selection for a new president, after the former president's term ended in 2007. In early 2008, at the time of the first fieldwork session, Lebanon was facing its worst political crisis since its 15-year civil war, with increased disagreements and tensions between the two sides. It was not until May 2008, when Lebanon elected a

new president, Michel Suleiman, that there was an end to the crisis between the pro-Western ruling coalition and the Hezbollah-led pro-Syria opposition that had paralyzed the country and occasionally threatened to erupt into civil strife.

Lebanon's mediascape is as fragmented as its landscape. During the war it allowed for the different factions to establish unlicensed radio and television stations as mouthpieces, peaking in the early 1990s at more than 50 TV channels and 100 radio stations (Kraidy, 1998) in a country with a population of less than 4 million. Lebanon's media serves the interest of the elite by consolidating their power over their communities with all of Lebanon's TV stations having agreed-upon and known confessional identities. Dajani (1992: 171) found that while Lebanese journalists are generally free of the state media control and enjoy relatively liberal press laws, this did not mean they are able to maintain independence and operate freely. While the state does not generally censor the media, almost all TV, radio and print are owned or sponsored by politicians and thus they are constrained by the editorial board and the pressure to represent those ideologies. Yet Kraidy (2003: 289) suggests in his ethnography of TV viewing by Lebanese Maronites, that when presented with well-crafted programs, members of different sects will watch television programs and listen to music that do not cater to the particularistic ideologies of their confessional groups. However, the media's outreach to other confessions is mainly for commercial purposes and when there are certain political emergencies or other crises, their coverage seems to become increasingly confessional (ibid).

Internet in Lebanon on the other hand, (see section 2.3), is slowly proliferating. The country has the largest number of websites amongst all Arab countries despite access being relatively expensive and slow (Gonzales-Quijano, 2003: 65-66). Gonzales-Quijano argues that this is due to its "relative political liberalism, its higher level of socio-economic developments – Lebanese private and public universities offer some 22 academic degree programs in IT and a long history of emigration, principally to industrialised nations" and more recently Gulf states. Emigration had always been a reoccurring pattern, perhaps owing to the historical and cultural tradition of Lebanon as a gateway between Europe and the Middle East, but mostly for its political and economic instability. Moreover, the small country does not provide jobs for the multitude of fresh university graduates every year.

It is common for Lebanese to emigrate in search of economic prosperity, better opportunities and to escape the harshness of the war. This is especially significant amongst professionals and young educated adults. Those who are able financially, travel for education and career opportunities to the West and today increasingly to neighbouring Gulf countries for their economic opportunities. There are no exact figures but the brain drain that the country experienced during the 15-year civil war and the subsequent 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon reached alarming levels.

2.1.2 Syria: Meanings and Perceptions

Syria has been under the socialist Ba'ath regime and the Asad family since 1970. Like Lebanon, it was under the Ottoman Empire until it declared independence in 1943 but only gained it in 1946 when the French left. Until the revolutions of the mid-1960s, the Sunnis, the major sect in Syria who dwelled in the cities, were the ruling class in Syria and were at the forefront of its struggle for independence against the Ottoman Empire in World War I and later against the French Mandatory regime. Syria had experienced "a period of turbulence and was then emblematic of the personality-based, weakly institutionalized and coup prone politics of the Arab world" (Hydemann, 1999: 1). In 1949 alone, for example, it underwent three military coups (George, 2003:3).

The Asad family are Alawite, a minority in Syria that comprise about 12% of the resident population and who have for centuries suffered from economic and social discrimination. Previously the Sunnis- comprising over 70% of the population - were the ruling elite (Salamandra, 2004: 14). While the underlying ideology of the socialist Ba'athist regime is the creation of a sense of nationhood obliterating class, sect and other distinctions, the Asad regime emphasized the protection of minorities over the majority in its early rule. These practices were not made for sectarian or religious objectives but to ensure political power. As Sadowski (1988: 164) notes, "the Asads were not trying to promote the Alawite community or Alawism, they sought to pursue their own political programs by using the Alawites". Likewise, Nikolas Van Dam (1996: 137) notes "however idealistic some Ba'athist leaders may

originally have been, they could not evade the socio-political reality that without making use of primordial ties, they could not monopolize power in Syria, let alone maintain themselves". This however, eventually developed a sectarian consciousness amongst the Syrian population (Sadowski, 1988: 164). Much of the Sunni elite is not happy about the situation; Salamandra in her ethnography of the Damascus elite encountered descriptions of Alawite identity with both 'parvenu gaucheness and undeserved influence' (Salamandra, 2004: 9). Likewise Raad (2008:1977) was told by his interviewees in Damascus that it is unacceptable and unbearable to be ruled by Alawites.

Lisa Wedeen (1999: 1) says in her introduction to her ethnography of the cult of Asad, that in official Syrian discourse, President Hafiz al-Asad has been depicted as omnipresent and omniscient. She states that the "cult of Asad operates as a disciplinary device based on compliance rather than obedience through enforced participation in rituals of obeisance that are transparently phoney both to those who orchestrate them and to those who consume them". She continues, basing her findings on her ethnographic study, that everyone in Syria is aware that the media are controlled by the state, that Hafez el Asad does not receive a 99.2% vote every time and that Asad is not the saviour of the country (ibid). Yet they all practice this politics of dissimulation.

As the profile of Alawites and other sects rose during the 70s and 80s, the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood accusations of sectarianism abounded and all Syrians grew acutely sensitive to religious affiliations (Sadowski, 1988: 165). Moreover, the regime has been consistently ruthless in its policies against any opposition. The greatest opposition to Asad's regime has taken form in organized religious groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood which culminated in the Muslim Brotherhood insurrection and the subsequent massacre of 5000 to 20000 people in Hamma in February 1982. However, there is also opposition coming from intellectuals, professionals and activists from secular political parties. They too were harshly dealt with. The lawyers, engineers' and doctors' associations were disbanded in 1980 and their leaderships imprisoned (George, 2003: 16).

Even though many Syrians are afraid of Asad and of the secret security police (moukhabarat), many are more frightened of what may happen in Syria without it. The regime enjoys legitimacy on two important issues (Weeden, 1999: 7). Most importantly, the Asads have been able to bring about political stability that Syria previously did not have. The struggles and conflicts of Syria's neighbours increasingly serve as a reminder of what could happen to a country without a strong leader. Lebanon civil war 1975-1990 and the Iraq's occupation and subsequent violent internal clashes are but a few of the major examples. Moreover, the Asad regime defends Syrians against Israeli threats of which they are fearful. Moreover, most Syrians agree that the Golan Heights, land seized by Israel in the 1976 war, must be returned and thus genuinely believe in the struggle against Israel until it returns it (Ibid). Extreme political instability in its international relations - such as pressure from the U.S and Israel, the Lebanese crisis and forced withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon in 2005, their alliance with Iran and increased conflicts with Gulf States and the re-emergence of sectarian identity in Syria – has made the regime the one stabilizing factor in the minds of the people (Wedeen, 1997). Meanwhile, Syria's official 'opposition' has not given them much hope as it remains divided and weak. The most recent organised opposition to the government, termed the Damascus Spring in 2005, which consisted of human rights associations, political parties, civil society forums and intellectuals and underground Islamic groups – was fragmented and ineffectual (Landis et al, 2006). It collapsed in less than a year with the imprisonment of eight of its civil society leaders.

Hafez el-Asad's eldest son died in March 2000 with his second son Bashar el-Asad inheriting the role – one that was supposed to go to his brother Basil who was the heir apparent but died in a speeding car accident in 1994. Under Bashar's leadership, the country underwent a degree of relaxation, with hundreds of political prisoners being released and a few tentative steps towards easing media restrictions. However, Bashar al-Asad's presidency failed to live up to the hopes for far-reaching domestic reform that greeted it in 2000. After a brief opening, Syria clamped down on dissent, and economic change remained slow. Many who once viewed Bashar as a potential partner, open-minded, and Western-oriented, now perceive him as just as tied to the Ba'athist regime as his father (Raad, 2008) – a regime far more entrenched and stronger than Bashar alone.

The media in Syria are largely state owned. While Bashar al-Asad promised reforms and for a brief period allowed for private publication to run, this was all put to an end after increasing international pressure on Syria as well as tensions coming from the old Ba'athist guards. Since then a press law emerged that gave the regime the freedom to suspend or close down any publication it deemed because of its content. All periodicals must obtain licences from the Prime Minister, who can at any time refuse an application for reasons of state interest (George, 2003:122). While there are a number of 'privately' run newspapers, only two or three of them are political and they have to have regular communication with the Ministry of Information, which could veto any topic covered. Syria has a long tradition of underground publishing, yet the consequences of getting caught are very high, leaving the tradition to those with a fervent and committed political mission. In this regard, for a private media to exist in Syria, it has to comply with the parameters set for by the regime on what is permissible. Meanwhile, the writers on the Internet can be anonymous and can potentially touch on any issue, topic or angle they choose to. For this reason, there have been a huge number of articles on blogs in the Middle East that have projected high hopes on the potential of bloggers breaking these boundaries.

While the regime's media does not disseminate barefaced lies, it omits information, censors facts and publicizes partial truths (Wedeen 1999: 44-45). Meanwhile, the rhetoric of the regime specifies the parameters of the permissible, communicating acceptable forms of speech and behaviour to citizens. (Wedeen 1999: 44-45). There are certain taboos subjects that are commonly known - religious minorities and religion, references to sex, criticism directed at the state must be directed only at state institutions without naming names. The president's name must never be mentioned with sarcasm or in joke. All these prohibitions, although not written, are perfectly understood by everyone (Wedeen, 1999: 88).

Self-censorship is the primary way of filtering information in Syria. In most of the state owned media, its journalists are government employees who fear losing their jobs at any point. Harkin (2009) researched, for her MPhil dissertation, privately run newspapers in Syria. In one of her interviews with the editor in chief of a privately owned media, he said:

> In Syria, and I think, in other countries there is self-censorship. We have this where I work. For example, today there was news that Moscow was rehabilitating the port in Tartus as a military base. Without referring to any senior person, I took the decision that we cannot cover this story. We cannot go alone without other media because of the experience we have (in knowing where red lines are). This is a kind of censorship

Harkin (ibid) argues that the red lines in state run media and privately owned media are the same. Yet she sees a shift "from reliance on the Syrian state news agency and other government-controlled sources as the sole feed for news stories which is an important break that cannot be reversed". Since the advent of satellite television in the 1990s many more Syrians are watching foreign broadcasts. The Internet has also been available since 2000, yet it has a low penetration rate. The kind of issues covered on blogs and other Internet media remains to be solicited. Is the same kind of self-censorship occurring online or is the margin of the 'permissible' wider?

2.1.3 Lebanon and Syria: Meshes and Clashes

Researchers on the Internet have often noted and highlighted the de-territorialisation that the Internet offers its users. On the Internet, one is not bounded by the fixed national boundaries and to tap into the on goings of communities of another country, one has the opportunity to only look online and find it. Yet, it has been observed by many researchers that the Internet solidifies national boundaries rather than obliterate it (see for example Erikson, 2006) and that most interaction online remained largely nationally bounded. Where language is not an obstacle, do bloggers from Lebanon and Syria interact with each other or only those from within their own country? At the time of research, disputes between the two countries were occurring and the relations between the two countries underwent significant changes. Did this have an effect online? Were bloggers from the two countries adjusting to these changes by communicating with each other? This section examines the relations the two countries have had with each other, and the events that took place in 2005-2008 that would completely alter how the two countries associate with each other. It is important to understand the relationship between the two countries and the

background to events that took place at the time of research to understand why and if the Lebanese and the Syrians are interacting online.

Before 1920 Lebanon and Syria were not two individual states but rather part of the many semi-autonomous provinces of the Ottoman Empire called Greater Syria. Since Lebanon and Syria emerged in their current borders, they have been defining and re-defining what it is they mean to each other (Pipes, 1990: 49). Continued disputes have occurred within different communities in both Lebanon and Syria on how the nations should be associated with each other.

Historically, attitudes toward union with Syria are heavily affected by the macro ever-shifting at different times in Lebanon's history. While, historically, Sunni Muslims in Lebanon have been most eager to become reunited with Greater Syria following a leftist Pan- Arab ideology, the majority of the Sunnis are now sided with the Harriri[14] backed government that is ostensibly opposed to the Syrian presence or any kind of Syrian influence on Lebanon. While the Maronites have been consistently the least pleased about the prospect of being incorporated into Muslim-dominated Syria (Raad, 2008: 256), the Geek Orthodox Christians along with the Sunnis have always been the loudest in their cries in favour of Arab unity. The most important efforts made in that regard were those by the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, founded in 1932 by a Lebanese Christian Antoun Saade, devoted primarily to re-establishing the territory of Greater Syria. Nearly 80 years later, the SSNP still exists and still works toward this end, although with limited influence (ibid).

Before the Lebanese Civil war in 1975, Syria did not have much involvement or influence on Lebanon's affairs. Although Syria never fully acknowledged Lebanon as a sovereign state, it was too weak and embroiled by its own internal problems to exert any foreign intervention into Lebanon. It was not until Hafez el Asad came to power in 1970 and the subsequent outbreak of the 1975 civil war that Syria became more directly involved in Lebanese affairs. At the onset of the 1975 civil war in Lebanon, Syria was addressing its role as mediator between the different factions – at that stage mostly between the Christian Phalange and the Progressive movement led

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[14] Saad Hariri is a Sunni Muslim and the son of Rafik Hariri who was assassinated in 2005. Evidence from the international tribunal set up to investigate the murder suggests that forces in Lebanon and Syria were involved in the assassination, yet the results of the tribunal have not yet been concluded.

by Druze leader Kamal Jumblatt and the Palestinians. A year later Syria entered Lebanon on behalf of an invitation by the Phalange Christians to restore peace in face of the chronic civil war and ongoing crisis. The concurrent global shifts in the region, with Iraq's Ba'ath party (in strong opposition to Syria's) gaining power amongst the Palestinian leftists and progressive movements of Lebanon, vested stronger interest in Syria's strategic decision to step in at this junction point in Lebanon. Its direct involvement in Lebanon's crisis received the acquiescent of a substantial segment of Lebanese society and the U.S who all perceived Syria's intervention as the only remaining alternative which could save Lebanon (Dawisha, 1980:17). Yet Asad's decision to intervene in the Lebanese civil war was unpopular amongst Arab nationalists both at home and abroad. Indeed, as Syria had always portrayed itself and its intention as the symbolic beacon of Arabism, its leaders could not easily justify to their citizens allying with the rightist isolationist Christians against its historical allies - the Palestinians and leftists. Some Syrians have referred to Lebanon as "Syria's Vietnam" in light of Syria's intervention and domination over Lebanon. Yet in official Syrian rhetoric, Asad was portrayed as a saviour of Lebanon (Wedeen, 1999). This argument was defended on the grounds that without its intervention, Lebanon would eventually be divided and one sectarian power would inevitably dominate over the other.

Hafez al-Asad's foreign policy had always been unpredictable, and seldom understood. While the Syrian regime has been posing as the beacon of Arabism and socialism following the Ba'ath Party's domination, Hanna Batatu (1999: 279) has pondered whether it has been "pan-Arabism, pan-Syrianism or whether in Hafez el-Asad's mind they are coupled together. Does Hafez al-Asad consecrate his time and efforts to such long-range objectives, or does he manipulate these abstractions and the feelings behind them for sheer instrumental purposes?" The confusion that surrounds these questions has culminated in conflict between Lebanese groups and Syrian ones.

During the civil war, Syria drafted over 40,000 troops to Lebanon and was heavily involved in the 15 year civil war, allying with different Lebanese forces at different points. After the end to the Lebanese war in 1990, Syria dominated Lebanon's political and civil infrastructure for 15 long years under the pretext of restoring

peace. The Taif agreement, the political blueprint that brought an end to the 1975-1990 Civil War, formalized relations between Lebanon and Syria; with Syria as the guarantor of Lebanon's security. According to Bourneman, the spoils of Lebanon became the central perks of the ruling elite after the way, but the common soldiers who served in Lebanon take little pride in the occupation (2007 xxi).

Military checkpoints were posted across the entire country, and stood as a constant reminder to the Lebanese that they were not an autonomous nation. Syria's invisible hand dictated who filled the Lebanese government's top positions, as the Syrian government supervised Lebanon's foreign policy and manipulated its elections according to its own criteria. Moreover, the Syrian government treated its protectorate as a captive market for its own exports, particularly agricultural produce.

Since Syria's per capita gross domestic product is less than one third of Lebanon's (Raad, 2008: 281), its workers were willing to labour for much lower wages than their Lebanese counterparts. In the late 1990's and 2000, Syrians were providing much of Lebanon's low skilled labour force. They would work in Lebanon in very bad conditions, with very little money and no health insurance or other benefits. The Syria regime protected this vital asset by entrusting only diehard Syrian loyalists within Lebanon's labour ministry (ibid).

With this influx of low paid Syrian workers and army officials, Lebanon's general perception of Syrians was not one of amicability, even amongst Lebanese who were politically loyal to Syria. The everyday encounter with low paid workers living in debilitating conditions and the anxiety of soldiers harassing Lebanese on their own soil for identification bred a dismal but silent view of Syria's presence along with growing defiance of it.

The Syrian presence in Lebanon received serious criticism following Israel's withdrawal from south Lebanon in 2000 – which was the pretext under which Syria's continued presence had been justified. In the same year, Hafez al-Asad and his son and successor, Bachar al-Asad then ordered a significant percentage of its military to withdraw from Lebanon. However, while Syria officially removed its military from Lebanon, its grip on internal Lebanese politics was not lessened. In September 2004,

despite widespread public opposition, the Syrian government pushed Lebanon's parliament to amend the constitution and extend the presidential term of Emile Lahoud, a Maronite Christian widely seen as a Syrian puppet whose term had been due to expire in November 2004. This move led to a wider and stronger anti-Syrian sentiments amongst the Lebanese, yet it was not until the assassination of Rafik Hariri the Lebanese Prime Minister in February 2005 and the subsequent protests that accompanied it that Syria completely withdrew from Lebanon.

While most Syrians, especially the labourers and soldiers in Lebanon, had felt the animosity and escalating anti-Syrian sentiments in Lebanon, the Syrian elite were less aware of this. In 2005, following Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon, anti-Syrian rhetoric became louder as anti-Syrian slogans dominated radio, TV waves and even the internet. This bred extreme activism against Syrian workers in Lebanon who were subjected to harassment, scaring them away and discouraging the influx of more Syrians into Lebanon. Whether they were regime loyalists or not, Syrians were becoming more conscious of Lebanon's impending hatred. Reports on the demonstrations and riots following Hariri's assassination as well as the anti-Syrian jokes of a racist nature that were dissipating through Lebanon via chain e-mails and phone text messages came as a surprise to many Syrians. As one interviewee from Damascus noted "Yes, there were mistakes [on part of the Syrian government], but what we are seeing from the Lebanese is spite and hatred" (Raad, 2008: 348). There were also a few cases of Syrian workers being beaten, humiliated, and even killed. Cars with Syrian number plates were showered with stones.

Yet there was a large contingent of Lebanese loyal to Syria who feared the impacting changes that would arise as a result of Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon. Lebanon and Syria's alliance was seen as a means of defying Israel, and without this alliance Israel would have more leeway to intervene in Lebanon's affairs – a country too small and fractured to be strong enough on its own. Those loyal to Syria were also acting in opposition to anti-Syrian rhetoric that looked to the West for support as many felt that Syria's presence in Lebanon also served as a shield against the country becoming a puppet of the US. They wanted Syria to remain until Lebanon was more stable. Lebanon was already at that point divided fiercely between those with the Syrian presence and those against.

Since Syria's withdrawal in 2005, the Lebanese have remained divided over what Syria's role in Lebanon should be. The future of the two countries' ties is unknown. In October 2008, during the first visit by a Lebanese president since 2005, newly elected Prisdent Michel Suleiman and Syrian President Bashar al-Asad agreed on normalizing their ties, starting with the unprecedented move of opening embassies in each other's capitals[15]. This was a highly political symbolic move since the two countries had not had ambassadorial relationship with each other since they became independent. How do these divisions and radical changes in Lebanon and Syria and the two countries together affect how individuals situate themselves socially?

These historical and socio-political factors are important to understanding the underlying rhetoric that goes on in everyday life in Lebanon and Syria and how Lebanese and Syrians think about their own identity, what it means to belong to their nation and how they associate with each other. They are used as resources that people draw upon when they talk about and make sense of their everyday experience. My attempt above has been to explain the mechanisms and processes that have made certain identity markers and associations a compelling reality. The next section provides an overview of how I intend to use these concepts in this thesis.

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[15] Syria refused to set up diplomatic relations with Lebanon and have embassies in the respective countries claiming that Lebanon and Syria's relations are too close to set up such embassies. Moreover the official maps in the 1950s and 1960s included Lebanon within the official boundaries of Syria (Avi-Ran, 1991: 5). Its refusal was based on their separation being a colonial invention rather than a true border.

2.2 Understanding Online Access and Inequalities

The Internet and its potential effects on society, politics and the world in general has been widely debated in academic and popular literature in the last ten years. With regards to the Arab world, most vigorously debated is the question of state censorship and the Internet's ability to undermine that censorship. Direct state censorship is indeed a dangerous and important impediment to taking advantage of the Internet in some, though not all, Arab countries. However, we need to look at inequalities in a wider theoretical, historical and cultural context if we are to understand its use and potential impact. There are other important variables, beyond a country's political system, that can determine how technologies are used and appropriated by people, and that can empower or disempower them. This section will look at censorship in a wider context that includes all impediments to gaining access to the Internet that individuals encounter in the Arab world. Inequalities in access to the Internet are all forms of censorship whether they are caused by economic, political or social structures.

Much literature on the Internet offers alternating dualisms between utopian and dystopian claims. Enthusiasts claim that the Internet offers decentralised, interactive, non-hierarchal and anonymous communication, where everyone is free to communicate and access information without restriction. Others are sceptical, claiming that the Internet is similar to other media technologies that have done nothing to decrease the knowledge gap. The 'increasing knowledge gap hypothesis' says that as the amounts of information in a community or society increase, the gap between the information have and have-nots increases and those with higher socio-economic status are always advantaged in new sources of information (Robinson el al. 2003: 2). Nevertheless, discrepancies arise not just between rich and poor, but knowledge, competencies and other factors of social stratification that have also been pertinent in maintaining and increasing inequalities (Mangisi, 2007).

Researchers on Internet inequalities have used the term 'digital divide' to denote the effects of exclusion from new information technologies. Yet the digital divide is

often confined to penetration statistics. The Internet world stats website[16], which is often used for penetration figures, claims to get usage statistics from data published by Nielsen//NetRatings, ITU, Computer Industry Almanac and other trustworthy sources. These figures, however, are not often very accurate. Internet penetration figures by country, region or even community measure the simple criterion of access, usually in the convenient locale of one's home and therefore are a reflection of resources ownership such as subscription to an ISP (DiMaggio et al, 2001: 311). Moreover, the figures are estimated as an average of 1-4 people per account, which they acknowledge on their website is not necessarily accurate. They state, "In many Third World countries one same Internet connection may be shared by many individual users. Due to this reason, Internet users might outnumber the amount of Internet access subscribers and also outnumber the telephone lines available in each country". Deborah Wheeler (2004, 2006) has pointed out the importance of Internet cafes for Internet browsing in the Arab world. This is mainly because it is far too expensive to have an individual account in one's own home. She believes that connectivity may be higher in the Arab world than conventional figures suggest because of the large numbers of users who use internet cafes or public access points (Wheeler, 2006). Indeed, the number of users can range from 0.6 in Qatar to 38.8 in Sudan, depending on the affordability of internet services, average family size and the number of public access points (Warf & Vincent, 2006:86)

Moreover, such statistics while useful for data gathering and comparison, do not tell us what happens after access has been achieved (DiMaggio, 2001). Those with a dial up connection will spend less time browsing because it costs more than those on broadband who pay a fixed fee for unlimited access. Factors such as how long it takes to obtain Internet access, who can afford it, how fast and effective it is and whether it is available throughout the country are just some of the variables that need to be considered. Wilson (2000) makes a distinction between 'formal access', that is physical availability to the internet, and 'effective access', that is affordable connectivity and diffusion of skills that people need to benefit from the technology (cited in DiMaggio et al. 2001: 313). Questions should be asked on whether people know the full extent of the possibilities available to them on the Internet, whether they are aware that they can publish their own content and in their home language,

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[16] http://www.internetworldstats.com/

whether they can evaluate the quality of the information they are getting and whether they are taking advantage of the searches on the Internet. These are all issues one needs to consider when measuring access and inequalities.

There are competencies, habits, experiences and lifestyles that factor into how one may choose to appropriate a technology and how they use it. The degree of education and cultural acceptance of technologies have been pertinent in maintaining and increasing inequalities (Mangisi, 2007). Miller & Slater (2000) found that Trinidad's high Internet integration rate is not only due to Trinidad's good economy and telecommunications infrastructure, but also to the importance of using email for communicating with the high number of its citizens who have emigrated abroad, that the community attaches to it.. Fandy states that when radio was introduced to the Arab world, whether privately or state owned, most people listened to it in cafes rather than in the privacy of their own homes (2000: 381); an engagement that was not witnessed in the West. This is because most people could not afford to buy their own radio sets, an economic structure that brought about different habits of consumption of the technology.

This is why, like James Slevin (2000), Miller and Slater, (2000) and Wheeler (2006), I intend to pursue a more contextualized, culturally sensitive analysis. Most studies that focus on non-Western usage are framed in terms of access and development. While such studies are valuable, access does not tell us how and why people are using the Internet, and 'development' almost always assumes a benefit. Technologies are not value –neural but still have both beneficial and disadvantageous consequences (Loader, 1998: 6). Much of the failure of the early promises for communication technologies to assist third world development can be attributed to the lack of contextualization (Williams et al, 1988: 45). Failing to consider the historical, political, and cultural processes against a technology's emergence will only lead to a partial analysis of the Internet and its integration into different societies. Context can help us understand why we see different patterns of usage in the Arab world than in other parts of the world.

Internet use in most of the Arab world is restricted to a privileged few. The users constitute a small, well-off, and highly educated and young minority. In the majority

of the Arab world, Internet use is hindered by high costs and a small percentage of the population owning computers. A study conducted in 2005 in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, revealed that the majority of those who had blogs were young (over 75% between 19-30), male (64%), well educated, and that the majority had a bachelor and many a Masters degree (Taki, 2005). Furthermore, over half of the respondents had studied in Europe or America (ibid). Infrastructure and economic censorship is another problem. Lebanon, one of the few Arab States that is free from the reign of censorship and regulation on the Internet, is burdened by economic and political corruption. It only introduced ADSL to Lebanon in 2006 rendering it the only Arab country to do so and it has one of the most expensive telephone and Internet charges in the Arab world.

While censorship is an important impediment to blogging, the most often reported on method is direct from the government, such as blocking certain sites, intimidating, threatening and sometimes imprisoning Internet users and bloggers who deviate from the accepted status quo. However, there are more nuanced forms of censorship, based on surveillance that can lead to self-censorship. Self-censorship is not necessary a conscious decision resulting from an overt external force. Self-censorship is often a decision that we are unaware of, stemming from these systems of power – all in a way related to the making of a specific social world. The perception that a society is watching can lead to this form of internalization of surveillance and thus to self-regulation and policing. The relationship between systems of social control and people in a disciplinary situation is accurately described by Michel Foucault (1975) who states that the result of surveillance is acceptance of regulations and docility -- a normalization of sorts -- stemming from the threat of discipline. Disciplinary power, according to Foucault, works by making those subject to it visible as in the example of the Panoptican. As Phillip Agre argues in his paper 'Internet and the political process', the culture has to want the freedom given to them, and in many societies, beyond a narrow stratum of intellectuals, the culture of authoritarianism runs deep (Agre, 2002: 317).

The Internet does and can indeed create many opportunities in the Arab world; its impact however, is neither utopian nor dystopian. Like many social spaces, it is a contested terrain and a battleground of discourses (Warf & Grimes 1997:270). It is

simplistic to presume that there will be instant shifts in power and social structures because of it. There are still inequalities shaped by sedimented traces of the context we live in and our past experience. The digital divide is a political outcome rooted in these historical systems of power and privilege and not simply a gap in access to and use of the Internet and computers (Kvasny, 2005: 2). Therefore, to understand its impact, we have to understand the political system as one structuring element that influences people to make choices in such or such a particular way, along with the many power struggles that exist within the site we are investigating and the stakes considered important in it. Therefore, when researching Internet use, one needs to look beyond the issue of access or the textual (or visual) representations of users online. We need to research what the Internet means to users and how it fits into the wider social world they inhabit. We also need to differentiate between different uses of technologies, as each one will have its own hierarchies and specific capital intrinsic to it.

2.3 "Identity" & "Community" - Online and Offline

2.3.1 The concepts of identity & community

The notion of 'Identity' as a Meta concept is analytically clumsy in the social sciences; it is something to explain rather than an explanation and is often dealt with in ambiguous terms. Yet it is very entrenched in its use in everyday life and political discourse. It is therefore important to start this section by not taking the term "Identity" as a given but introducing it and being clear about the way in which I want to use it.

Essentialist rhetoric concerning identity rarely has a place in academic circles nowadays and has been vigorously criticized (Hall 1990, Gilroy, 2000). Social constructionism and deconstructivism have become widespread and contest essentialist views that identities can be singular, integral, altogether harmonious and unproblematic. Social constructionists question essentialist arguments that identities are based on some kind of 'essence' or a set of core features (Calhoun 1994: 13). They also challenge the view that identity is given naturally or produced purely by

acts of individual will. Constructivist stances on identity see identities as not fixed. They are often described in terms such as 'fragmented', 'fluid' and 'multiple'. Pointing to the social and cultural histories by which they have been constructed has become the main way of trying to challenge the grip of the essentialist identities and the problems they create (ibid).

However, overdone claims about fragmentation and multiplicity do little to explain the prevailing singularity and coherence that people seek to achieve. As Burbaker & Cooper argue, 'the deconstruction of their meaning can be so extreme in order to cleanse the term from the hard essentialist claims that it leaves us with a concept so elastic that it is often incapable of performing serious analytical work' (2000: 11). Indeed, agents generally strive towards coherence, juggling their various identities, social and personal and attempting to put them into a meaningful whole (Crossley 2005: 145). Moreover, essentialist invocations of race, nation, gender and class and other identities remain common in everyday discourse throughout the world (Calhoun 1994: 14). Indeed Brubaker & Coopers argue that if prevailing identity is indeed constructed, then how can we understand the sometimes coercive force of external identifications and the "power and pathos" of identity politics (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000: 1). Everyday Identity talk and Identity politics are real and important phenomena. While it is important to be aware of them, it does not mean that we are to analyse the actions of actors because of them.

While, 'Identity' is indeed a key term in the vernacular idiom of contemporary politics, (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000: 2) this does not mean that we should use it as a category of analysis or assume that identities are possessions that are fixed or unambiguous. We should differentiate between categories of practice, that is everyday social experience developed and deployed by ordinary social actors and categories of analysis that are deployed by social scientists (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000: 4). Identity is used by lay actors in everyday settings to make sense of themselves and how they differ from others and by political entrepreneurs to persuade people to understand themselves, their interests and their predicaments in a certain way and call for collective action. Thus the term Identity is implicated both in everyday life and in identity politics of various forms (ibid). By uncritically adopting categories of practice as categories of analysis, we risk reifying putative concepts

such as nation, race and identity, religion and tribe rather than seeking to explain the mechanisms and processes through which these concepts have become a powerful and compelling reality (Ibid: 5).

Joseph (1999) emphasizes in her writings on sectarianism in Lebanon that the boundary markers between various sects, even after 1975 (during the outbreak of the civil war), are flexible ones that have shifted in importance with changing historical realities and opportunities. Therefore, even in countries where sect can be used to mobilize, and change the realities, location and politics of someone at a given time, we have to consider the historical context in which they are maintained. They are not linear identities and there are many parts off one identity such as gender roles, ethnicities and kinship that are all interlinked. Identities politics is also not being erased but provides the basis for new social distinctions to arise. We have to understand the cultural meaning of each of these in particular contexts. Sadowski (1988: 163) argues against literature that has pinpointed sect as the sole basis of a Syrian's identity. He states

> Loyalties to one's confessional group compete or are synthesized with other parochial bonds to family, tribe, cult, and with more universal ties to class, party and even nation. In reconciling these ties and deciding which of them may take priority, Syrians may reach conclusions according to the specific context in which they are acting.

Brubaker & Cooper argue that we should dispense with the term identity altogether. They propose the use of "Identification". The argue "unlike Identity which is a condition, Identification is a process, a complex and also often ambivalent one but one whose use they prefer to that of Identity as it 'invites us to specify the agents that do the identifying" (2000: 14) and does not propose that the process of Identifying (even by powerful agents such as the State) will necessarily result in the internal sameness, the distinctiveness and the bound group-ness that political entrepreneurs seek to achieve (Ibid). This is especially significant on blogs. If certain identity markers online are less prevalent, what effects does this have?

While identity should be thought of as a process rather than a solid thing that people have, I do not agree that we should dispense with the term altogether. We should not

underestimate or neglect the importance of the act of invoking an essential identity. These are positions, which Hall (1990: 230) calls "strategic" and "arbitrary". Indeed, in certain struggles and conflicts, or where a particular category of identity has been repressed, de-legitimised or devalued in dominant discourses, a vital response maybe to claim value for all those labelled by that category, thus implicitly invoking it in an essentialist way (Calhoun 1994: 17). Calhoun proposes that rather than a simple opposition between essentialism and constructivism, it is important to see a field of possible strategies for confronting issues of identity (1990:17). Similarly, Hall (1990: 225) understands cultural identity as being and becoming. Identity as being, which offers a sense of unity and commonality, and identity as becoming or a process of identification, which shows the discontinuity in our identity formation.

Identity, according to Hall (1990), is made up of unstable points of identification or suture. He sees Identity not as an essence but a temporary positioning of identity, which is "strategic" and arbitrary. He says 'our belongingness to it constitutes what Benedict Anderson calls an "imagined community"' (Hall 1990:231). Terms such as Arab, Lebanese, Muslim, Maronite are very real terms in that we, at any specific moment, could invoke them, resist them, inflate or deflate them but it doesn't mean that we have to take them for granted and adopt them uncritically as categories of analysis. This is especially true in the Arab world in which organized ethnic and religious groupings have emerged in different periods to compete for power, resources, and privileges, thus highlighting the contingency and relativity of identity. As Salamandra argues, 'there has been much political science theorising on sectarian versus other affiliations. However, we should remember that sectarian references operate as local idiom rather than analytical categories' (2004:12). Referring to Identity as a category of practice or viewing it as a social construct does not imply that it does not have real consequences and effects (Loveman, 1999).

Castells (1997: 7) argues, while Identities are constructed through a process of individuation, they can also originate from dominant institutions but become identities when and if social actors internalise them. The construction of Identities uses building materials from many different things and always takes place in a context marked by power relationships.

As the self is contextual, and relational, it defines itself according to the specific power relations of the spaces it manoeuvres in. Suad Joseph (1999, 2000a, 2000b) analyses the dichotomies in literature regarding the study of "community" in the Arab world. She says that Arab societies have been classified as either individualistic and therefore incapable of collective action, or as tribal or corporatist and therefore fragmented by tribal, ethnic, or religious groups, rendering them incapable of collective societal action as well. The problem, she outlines, is that these are both perceived as dysfunctional (Joseph, 1999: 11).

In the Arab world, a corporatist attitude is not seen as dysfunctional or the anti-thesis of independence and maturity but rather integration into family or community. It is locally recognized as healthy, responsible and mature (Joseph, 1999:9). It is a process by which persons are socialized into social systems that value linkage, bonding and sociability. Individualistic and communitarian stances can exist side by side. She says "in the Arab world they do; various forms of collective or communitarian values are highly regarded alongside forms of individualism" (Joseph, 1999: 9)

Joseph sees Arab societies, like all societies, as neither individualist not corporatist but rather embedded in relational matrices that shape the sense of self, but do not deny them their distinctive initiative and agency. She says, "in Arab societies, relational matrices, although primarily embedded in kinship and relationships, are shifting and situational" (Joseph, 1999: 110). The self is co-shaped by the familial structures, the kinship, the sect, morality and idioms of the context. There is agency but it is also bounded by the webs of relationships that shape and co-shape their desires, interests and ambitions. In this sense, "the self is neither individualistic nor collective but absorbing and actively defining self and other, each of which shifts as each actor acts" (Joseph, 1999: 15)

Arab socio-cultural systems have often supported the primacy of the family over the individual. Children have been socialised to feel a life long responsibility to their parents and siblings. This is due to the fact that Arabs (and specifically in Lebanon and Syria) do not look to the State to welfare but rather to their families and kin. Yet despite these corporatist family norms, persons in these families have often resisted;

they have constructed networks that crossed the boundaries of family, neighbourhood, class, religion and nation. Notions of self then emerge that while privileging collectivistic attitudes, are quite hybrid (Joseph, 1999: 11).

Joseph (ibid) suggests a construct of 'connective selfhood' that, when coupled with patriarchy, produces 'patriarchal connectivity' (Joseph, 1999: 12). She uses it to mean the privileging of men and seniors and the mobilization of kinship structures, morality, and idioms to legitimate and institutionalise gendered and aged domination. We must however, be careful not to assume that in patriarchal societies, men and seniors direct relationships, she says. Indeed, each person in the interaction is an active participant and their action are always relational to the situation they are in.

2.3.2 The concept of Community in the social sciences and Arab world

As the self is contextual, and relational, it defines itself according to the specific power relations of the spaces it manoeuvres in. Suad Joseph (1999, 2000a, 2000b) analyses the dichotomies in literature regarding the study of "community" in the Arab world. She says that Arab societies have been classified as either individualistic and therefore incapable of collective action or as tribal or corporatist and therefore fragmented by tribal, ethnic, or religious groups, rendering them incapable of collective societal action as well. The problem, she outlines, is that these are both perceived as dysfunctional (Joseph, 1999: 11).

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2.3.3 The concepts of Habitus & Field

Identity is thus seen as a process and a set of practices that is always relational to the situation, context and power relations at stake. Boudieu's interrelated concepts of field and habitus are powerful tools to understand people's identity (habitus) and how practices and actions of individuals are relational to the contexts (fields) that they are part of. The power of Bourdieu's concepts of field and Habitus is that they helps us to think relationally in terms of internal and external factors at work in social groupings so that we don't analyse identities as given static things but rather as

practices that have different meanings and functions depending on the social context or field(s) in which they are manoeuvring in.

According to Bourdieu, the habitus, proposes that human beings are historical agents who carry acquired sensibilities and categories of perception that are shaped by sedimented traces of their past social experiences, which they remain largely unaware of (Wacquant, 2009). Habitus is a 'second nature' (Crossley, 2005: 105) formed in part through learning the relevant "language" – system of 'vision and division' that allows one to make sense of and communicate in specific fields, to 'play' the 'game' of sociology, 'art appreciation', journalism and so on (Crossley, 2005: 112).

There are three properties of the concept of habitus that Wacquant (2009: 141) recounts in his article 'Habitus as Topic and Tool' that I have found useful to my study on bloggers. Firstly, the habitus is a set of acquired dispositions – no one is born a blogger, or a writer or an artist but acquires the motivations and competencies to engage in these practices through their particular socialisation and life 'trajectory'. Secondly, habitus holds that the mastery,[of something] operate[s] beneath the level of consciousness and discourse – thus bloggers' actions are often pre-reflective and they are not always aware of the factors that have shaped why they do what they do. Thirdly, habitus indicates that sets of dispositions vary by location and social trajectory; thus bloggers with different life experiences will have gained varied ways of thinking, feeling and acting Their inculcated dispositions will be distinct from those with different trajectories and competencies, their spontaneous actions may be structurally over-determined by their movement and positioning in differentiated social space, while still being, nonetheless, spontaneous.

While the concept of habitus treats people as beings whose actions express their purposes, desires and understanding of the world, they are themselves nevertheless also products of the worlds they belong to and thus reflect their inherence in the world in what they do (Crossley, 2005: 110). This is reflected practically in the way we find people who manoeuvre in similar fields, to have common attributes - certain accents, a way of talking, a language they speak, tone and style. This is significant in the blogosphere where physical cues are invisible and where individuals have access

to as many worlds as they want. Are they still forming enclaves of similar backgrounds?

Bourdieu uses a game metaphor to explain socialisation in different worlds. In a game, one plays by the rules operating in that game. These rules are taken for granted within it (structures). Yet it is not only the rules of the game that have an effect on the player's actions. The actions of one player affect the actions of another, to whom he/she responds, such that we cannot understand the actions of either independently without their co-participation in the game (Crossely, 2005: 85). The habitus can in this sense be referred to as the 'feel for the game'. Each game, football, rugby, tennis, has different rules and those participating in it abide by the rules. The game itself refers to Boudieu's concept of the field ('field of play' to run with the metaphor), which is used to capture the differentiated and relatively autonomous sectors of the social world such as the journalistic field, the artistic field or the field of higher education. To understand how a field may operate, questions such as 'what do agents flow towards and what do they flow away from', what trends and fashions animate collective action at any particular point in time?' and 'what practices attach to which groups or locations in social space?' (Crossley, 2005: 80-86). The habitus of someone determines whether they are disposed to recognise and play in the field in the first place as well as their possibilities of action within the field. The different forms of capital that one has access to will position the player in the game - social (contacts, social networks), symbolic (Status) and cultural (education, class, taste, manner), economic (accumulated wealth), linguistic capital (mastery of language). Yet in different fields, different forms of capital are valued more than others. All three; habitus, capital and field work together, are intertwined and shape how the possibilities of action can occur according to Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Yet whether the Syrian or Lebanese blogospheres can be meaningfully constructed as a field in their own right, or a set of many fields, can only be investigated through empirical investigation. As Bourdieu remarks, not all ensembles constitute a field and constructing – delimiting and determining it, as an object of inquiry, should not be an act of imposition (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 100). For example, he goes on to say "I seriously doubt that the ensemble of cultural associations (choirs, theatre

groups, reading clubs etc) of a given American state or of a French region form a field" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 100). Finding the field becomes as much part of the research project as any data collection which is done once the field is found – in fact finding the field at all may turn out to be a red herring (Hine, 1998: 15)

Yet by conceptualising the Lebanese and Syrian blogosphere as possible fields, the empirical analysis allows me to see them as objects of study within themselves and not to reduce my analysis to observable interactions but to also seek out the underlying and invisible relations that shape action (Swartz, 1997: 119) and look for the dynamics intra field (within a field) and inter field (in relation to broader fields). One way of discerning whether a field exists is to look at its relative autonomy from broader power structures. If one think of it as a 'space within which an effect of field is exercised, so that what happens to any object that traverses this space cannot be explained solely by the intrinsic properties of the object in question' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 100). So whether the field has effects on objects that are specific to the field itself is put into question. It therefore sets the stage for the study of not only the bloggers' external context, the broader fields, but to take into consideration properties within the blogosphere itself that may have its own dynamics; rules struggle over definition, hierarchies and competition. Indeed, the concept of field was developed by Bourdieu to overcome the overly internalist studies (that focus on micro-level discourses, practices, actors) or the externalist tendencies (that focus on macro-level institutions, economic and the state). Whereas, as Bourdieu stresses (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 228) to think of fields is to "think relationally", such that the analysis of individuals, groups or institutions is understood only in relation to the positions they occupy vis-à-vis other individuals, groups and institutions.

2.3.4 Literature on Identity online

With the advent of the Internet and new forms of communication there arose a rhetoric that the Internet was the epitome of our post-modern world. Literature focused on the idea of a disembodied, multiple, fluid and performative identity. The accounts, initially, began with utopian visions of a virtual world separate from the offline world, where actors could roam and interact freely, globally and anonymously. Most agreed that because of the Internet's structure and the

opportunities it allows for: anonymity, many-to many communication and erasure of geographic boundaries, that it was essentially empowering (Turkle, 1995, Poster, 1990, Rheingold, 1993, Stone, 1996). Others proposed that because of the lack of physical - visual cues to judge each other online, such as ethnicity and gender, it fostered a new egalitarianism (Poster, 1990, Shaw 1997). This literature was perhaps relevant for the type of computer-mediated communication (CMC) of its time. Yet its usefulness for new forms of CMC seems to be in demise. Most users of newer user generated communication such as weblogs do not regard their online activities as a separate social activity from their offline world and in general, strive for representations online that are very similar to their offline selves. Indeed, the literature that focuses on anonymity overwhelmingly views Internet activity as a new social domain separate from the offline world and thus overlooks the importance of context; culture, economy and power structures that influence, encourage or hinder people's access to computer-mediated communication. I argue that this account of technology that is presumed to bring about social and psychological changes, irrespective of the ways in which it is used, is overly deterministic.

Much of the early work on computer-mediated communication suggested that people will utilize the Internet to experiment with their identity, escape from it and perform multiple selves in numerous virtual venues. The most often cited sources are Turkle's (1995), *Life on the screen*, Rheingold's (1993), *The virtual community* and Stone's (1996), *The war of desire and technology at the close of the mechanical age*.

While much recent empirical work on online communication has concluded that people, in general, strive for representations online that are very similar to their offline selves and call for the bridging of the online/offline, real/virtual dichotomies (Miller & Slater, 2000, Hine, 2002, Valentine & Holloway, 2002, Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2002), these earlier accounts that focused on MUD's (multi-user domains), newsgroups and chat rooms, as Wynn and Katz demonstrate, tended to have a "journalistic appeal based on futurism and radical scenarios" (1997: 297). They were also seen as representative of all online communication.

Turkle (1996) implies in her study that anonymity online is potentially empowering and since we cannot judge each other on certain attributes such as race and gender –

it is equalising. Shaw (1997) argues that it is empowering because of the lack of visual cues, thus allowing individuals to take on roles and experiment with their identity in a way that may be difficult to do in the offline world. Other researchers in the field (Wheeler 2006, Slevin 2000) argue, in contrast, that identities are continuous with the offline self. Bell argues that identity online is a continuum or even amplifier of existing societal divides perpetuating notions of identity politics founded on the notions of inclusion and exclusion, insider and outsider (Bell, 2007: 267). Similarly, Schmitz (1997) refutes the claims that the online world may be potentially democratic because of the absence of visual clues to identity. He says that, "although some markers of difference may be hard to detect online, others are easy to identify. Dress, colour and other status cues may be invisible, whereas educational competencies and linguistic skills increase in importance. Therefore, we are not more equal online but just use different criteria to rate each other" (1997: 85).

Several race theorists have argued that language and categorization are more important to establishing so-called racial categories than either images or even physical contact. Artist and philosopher Adrian Piper has continuously worked with the notion of 'blackness' as a social construct. Her light skin colour and her accent allow others to assume she is white. In her two pieces "Cornered" (1988) and "My Calling Card" (1986), Piper creates a situation in which the gallery-goer is confronted with the artist's blackness. Her performance piece 'My Calling Card' disrupts the essentialist notion that race or gender is something you see. She hands out cards to her viewers that read "dear Friend, I am Black". Piper asserts that the idea of looking is informed more by a conceptual presupposition than an overt awareness of what one sees; this racism is not about looking (Keen, 1995: 15).

Indeed, categorization can be used in an arena where no physical contact occurs or where interaction is largely text-based. As Kolko et al (2000:5) argue we cannot suddenly dispense with our knowledge, experiences and values when we go online but we bring them with us when we log on. They continue that all of us who spend time online are already shaped by the ways in which certain categorizations matter offline. McPherson (2000) argues that, instead of focusing on identity play online, we need to look at participation and politics in order to understand the online world. Indeed, many researchers are looking into the ways in which online interactions are

influenced by offline power structure and the construction of Identity (Wilson & Peterson 2002: 457). Race, class, ethnicity and whatever identities we have offline do not automatically neutralise online. Before we even get online, there are wider issues such as poverty, illiteracy rates, poor or good telecommunication systems, and degrees of institutional support that affect the characteristics of Internet users and their online behaviour. Understanding local discourses of media technologies is crucial since speakers incorporate new technologies of communication from existing communicative repertoires, which influences new and emerging cultural practices (Hutchins 1995, Keating 2000 cited in Wilson & Peterson 2002).

Helen Kennedy, in an article entitled "Beyond Anonymity", questions the very notion of our understanding of Identity online. She argues that it is now important to move away from the claim that Internet identities are multiple, fragmented and anonymous, not only because many identities are continuous with the offline self but more importantly because common uses of the concept of anonymity are limiting for carrying out analysis of Internet experiences (2006: 859). She says that not all online communities are created for anonymous identity performance and not all participants engage in virtual environments anonymously (Ibid). Kennedy (2006: 870) differentiates between *being* and *feeling* anonymous. She said of her empirical study of Internet use by minority ethnic women in the UK, that when conducting a textual analysis of their sites, she anticipated that many of them did not want to be anonymous. Yet upon interviewing them she found that anonymity was not as absent as she had expected. While people included photographs and sometimesfull names on their WebPages – they still felt a degree of anonymity. She argues that to understand the complexity of identity online, we need to move beyond the Internet interface to discuss their meanings for their producers, which could lead to a richer reading of online text; thus a move from the text to the context in which the text is produced.

Livingstone (2007: 19) is wary of a radical social constructivist approach to the Internet. She says the challenge is to sustain a subtle analysis of the context of use and the semiotic richness of the online world. Without this processes of mediation, notions such as public and private, local and global, personal and societal, become lost. Hine (2000) argues that the Internet should be seen by researchers as both a

'culture in its own right' and a 'cultural artefact'. In this regard, these two sites should not be investigated as separate and distinct but as intertwined and connected (ibid: 39). Through her case study of the websites and newsgroups, she found that the process of webpage construction means different things to different authors. As it is a form of social action, it is made meaningful depending on the assumptions that authors hold for these activities (2000: 148). By understanding offline contexts, she says, researchers can interrogate "how users of the Internet carve out their own social spaces through their reading practices, and how diverse their interpretations are of the activities which they observe online" (ibid: 155).

In conclusion, the Internet is not a platform that is an abstract. Although visual cues that people use to judge each other online may be hidden within these online interactions, there are other indicators used to categorise people, such as language and education, that cannot disappear online (Shmitz, 1997, Kolko 2000). Identities are not just physically visible or consciously constructed. They are ingrained and internalized in our very sense of being and we bring that into the online world. How we perceive, think and feel is shaped by sedimented traces of our past experiences, which we remain largely unaware of – that is, our Habitus in Bourdieu's lexicon (Crossley 2005:105). Indeed, habitus is not habitual; it is embodied phenomenon that goes beyond our consciousness.

As Burbaker & Cooper (2000: 14) argue rather than trying to figure out peoples identities, which is relational and contextual, it is important to seek out what people do with their identity - that is the process of identification. This view, they argue, "invites us to specify the agents that do the identifying" (ibid) and does not propose that the process of Identifying (even by powerful agents such as the State) will necessarily result in the internal sameness, the distinctiveness and the bound group-ness that political entrepreneurs seek to achieve (Ibid).

While online identities are derived from offline ones, it is important to remember that they will not necessarily be identical. An Internet user is not always privileging the same identities in every online interaction. Just like the offline world we consciously (and unconsciously) inflate, deflate, hide and reveal certain aspects depending on who we are talking to and what the stakes are in the field we are talking in. So while

we should focus on the wider context of use, we should not ignore the particular dynamics at play within the 'field' of blogging and discursive practices that generates meanings within in.

2.3.5 Literature on community online

It is difficult to talk of weblogs without the term virtual community cropping up. Howard Rheingold (1993: 6) first coined the term virtual community as a new space of interaction that has received its prominence as a result of a decline in public life in modern societies. Literature, following Rheingold came in two extreme directions: they either viewed communication on the internet as empowering and liberating because of the erasure of geography and lack of visual cues to judge one another or in sharp contrast as debilitating: erasing offline communities. Either way online involvement was supposed to 'do' something and have profound effects on the way people engage with each other and their sense of community.

Yet both these accounts are technologically deterministic as they view these groups as new and as separate from the offline environments they are embedded in. The term community is problematic as its very meaning is still disputed among social scientists. Bakardjieva, (2003: 293) argues that "the engineers and researchers who were the first to build, experience and study the Internet, along with other technologies for computer-mediated communication, employed the concept of community in order to legitimate their project and to demonstrate its significance and nobility". Meanwhile, recent research has found that bloggers do not necessarily blog so as to interact with their audiences, other bloggers or commentators, but do so primarily to express themselves. Herring, Kouper et al (2005:1) state that interlinking between blogs does not necessarily constitute a form of conversational interaction "we do not think of websites that contain links to other websites as engaging in 'conversation' then, should we characterize weblogs as conversing with one another when they do the same?" Mansell (2007: 8) critiques the notion of weblogs as a tool for the creation and maintenance of virtual communities. She refers to Lenhart's and Fox's study that found that the bloggers's primary motivation for blogging is self-expression and documentation of experience. Lenhart (2005: 89-90) in a similar

study found that her respondents felt the blog was a personal space, and that the audience was incidental. Similarly Brake (2009: 29) states that the characterisation of bloggers as deliberative and communitarian rather than engaging in one way communication is often undermined as 'unimportant' in academic discourse.

However, while interaction online may not constitute a community, some argue that communication online is still meaningful for those partaking in it. Cerulo (1997: 54) for example states that the exchanges she has observed in her ethnography of 'Acoustic Neuroma newsgroup', indicate that online encounters are more than a "one-shot deal." Online exchanges, that she found, "typically serve as catalysts for long-term and meaningful relationships". She continued that these relationships build over time and are often continued through the use of other communications channels (i.e., telephone, the postal service) and often lead to face-to-face encounters. Reid (1995) also found that social bonds required for relationship development can be obtained with computer-mediated interaction. She argues, however, that the process takes longer than it would in offline groups and requires slightly more effort on the part of the participants.

On another level, others have been sceptical about the 'deliberative' characterisation that often accompanies description of computer-mediated communication. Cass Sunstien (2006) warns readers of the 'public forum' debate' that goes on in 'public' spaces. He begins his chapter 'the Surprising Failures of Deliberating Groups' by quoting an experiment made in the U.S, which gathered 10 groups of 5-7 people together to debate some of the most controversial issues in American politics at the time[17]. Participants were asked to write their views on the topic before and after the debate. It was found that in almost every group, members ended up with more extreme views after they spoke to one another (ibid, 2006: 45). He asserts that most studies have found that bloggers link to others with the same views as them and if they cross cite to an 'opposing' article or blog, it is usually for the sake of casting contempt on the opposing views. He warns that the construction of 'information cocoons and echo chambers' is a real problem that exists (ibid, 2006: 191). Indeed,

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[17] The three topics they were asked to debate 'Should States allow same-sex couples to enter into civil unions? Should employers engage in affirmative action by giving a preference to members of traditionally disadvantaged groups? Should the United States sign an international treaty to combat global warming?

because a new tool is made available that makes socialisation with others from different backgrounds and opinions more accessible; it doesn't mean that this will happen.

While most research on online community have investigated socialisation that is bounded in one space (such as on forums, chartrooms), weblogs differ in that they are distinct spaces that belong to one individual. In this regard, can we call the sporadic interactions that occur between bloggers through comments and links on-line communities, Bakardjieva (2003), questions? She believes that the term virtual community is not always the best way to describe people's social activities online and proposes using the term 'virtual togetherness' rather than community in order to avoid the normative overtones present in the concept of community. She asserts that, "the opposite of virtual togetherness is not real or genuine community, as the current theoretical debate suggests, but the isolated consumption of digitised goods and services within the realm of particularistic existence" (Ibid: 294). Using the concept of virtual togetherness allows her to view the meaning of these often *random and sporadic* interactions online. Hine (2000: 108) finds that the concept of 'space' is meaningful in interpreting the Internet. Spaces, according to Hine, are defined by connection rather than distance and they are expressed and sustained by Internet users themselves. She argues that the "Internet are performed spaces, in that they are shaped and sustained by the social practices through which people interpret and use them".

Most studies on Internet use in national contexts deal with issues of access, cost and infrastructure. Yet belonging to a particular nation not only has an affect on how and who has access but also on how groupings and different social milieus are created and in how users understand themselves as a consequence of belonging to these nations. In this regard, we cannot assume that the Internet is worldly and the way blogging is used is generalizable but rather that there are many factors, political, social and economic that may have an effect on how the internet is used and which formations are maintained online.

Chapter III. The Methodology

This thesis is informed by ethnographic methods because they place importance on the actors' own interpretation and explanation of their activities. I aim to explore bloggers' own narrative of themselves and their blogging by interviewing them and observing them, yet without neglecting the importance of the offline world. For this reason, I study the platform that bloggers communicate in –, the online world – as well as the world they inhabit – the offline world. While looking at the characteristics and particularities of each, my analysis emphasises the offline and online worlds not as two distinctly separate entities, but ones that continuously feed into each other.

The chapter begins by mapping out literature on online ethnographic methods. The first section sets out some of the arguments brought forward concerning the different approaches to studying the Internet using ethnographic methods. I then elaborate on my approach to fieldwork, which focused heavily on bridging methods of studying the online and the offline. The next section is an overview of the multi-methods used to gather data. Problems associated with gaining access to bloggers, the implications of pragmatic sampling and the theoretical approach taken during interviews are also discussed in detail. The final section explores the use of an online questionnaire along with details on how the questionnaire was constructed and adapted into two languages – Arabic and English. I also examine the quantitative/qualitative debate and the challenges of combining multiple methods in a research project.

3.1 Virtual ethnography debates

Ethnography, as a methodological approach, had been used by media scholars to study television viewers (Liebes & Katz 1990, Morley 1980), romance novels (Radway, 1987) and other forms of audience reception. With the emergence of the Internet and different forms of computer–mediated communication, new challenges arose for those using ethnography to study online phenomena. Traditionally, ethnography has meant physical immersion into the field of study. Yet, when the field of study is virtual, and its boundaries are undefined, how does a researcher

achieve the same level of immersion? Vigorous debates have emerged as to what constitutes ethnography of online computer-mediated communication. Do researchers immerse themselves in the online world and study that world as if it is a 'culture in its own right' or do they study participants' offline habitat and treat the Internet as a cultural artefact? (Hine, 2000: 14).

Mason (1999) in his chapter titled 'Issues in Virtual Ethnography' defines ethnography as an approach that treats the virtual space as the ethnographic field. He says that a virtual ethnography works with the persona that has been projected into cyberspace by the person behind the screen. He argues that when we do participant observation we usually do it in the same medium in which the culture we study is communicated. As such, the online or virtual persona of the participant is the main focus of the ethnographer. He suggests that the ethnographic context needs to be identified first and that is done by assuming that the Internet is the virtual space, the same way that many of its users do. A virtual ethnography is then an ethnography that treats cyberspace as the ethnographic reality.

As a response to the literature discussed in Chapter 2 on identity play, treating the online as the only field site brings up questions on authenticity. If we only study the online world of participants, how do we know that informants are telling the truth? Mason (ibid) argues that virtual ethnography takes exactly the opposite view: rather than verifying informants' veracity in other media, one fully immerses oneself in the virtual community being studied. He advances his argument by stating, 'as with any ethnography it is the detailed, systematic, and exhaustive participation within the group and building of relationships over time that allow the ethnographer to build – with the help of the participants – an account of the culture created within that group'. Thus a virtual ethnography is one that studies the creation and maintenance of this culture from the inside and treats it as the ethnographic truth (Ibid, 1999).

Crichton & Kinash (2003) also argue that textual conversation is the most essential element of virtual ethnography. They state:

> we feel it is essential to reinforce the notion that we were not just working online because we could (technological imperative), but because online interviewing can offer something that face-to-face methods cannot… and thus honors the field in which the participants are working – the online environment.

They go on to discuss the advantages of online interactive interviewing rather than offline, arguing that when the field to be researched is virtual, conducting the interview online seems consistent with the actual practice of the participants. They conclude that interactive interviewing can compensate for the time lapse that email interviewing suffers from and gathers a more spontaneous, less thought out response than face-to-face interviews.

Thomsen el al. (1998) similarly assert that online communities are 'real' in every way and ought to be studied for what they are. They outline the advantages that studying the online world have yielded for ethnographers in terms of access to textual material – something, they argue, ethnographers have always taken advantage of to study their subjects. They state that all actions of the participants are in the form of text – interactions, speech, community rules – and are there for the researcher as text (Ibid, 1998). There are no artefacts to analyse other than text and thus there is nothing for the ethnographer to miss.

While analysing the texts of computer-mediated communication will allow the ethnographer to not miss anything, textual analysis without interaction by the ethnographer and with the observed participants is not enough to obtain a high level of credibility. The same authors (ibid) argue that researchers must realise the limits of text analysis as it leads to a loss of additional layers of codes, meanings and constructed realities that have been embedded into the communication and actions of the members. Thus they propose that using a multi-method triangulation of participant observation, textual or discourse analysis and online qualitative interview could lead the ethnographer into understanding the meanings behind the interaction taking place online.

The above researchers all advocate the conduct of a purely online ethnography and treat the online world as a separate entity from the offline world. Andreas Wittel (2000), however, in his essay 'Ethnography on the Move: From the Field to Net to Internet', finds that ethnographic research that merely focuses on the virtual outcome of the subject can be problematic. He argues that this dichotomous outlook was created with developments in the social sciences that made stark distinctions between the online and offline world, creating a duplication of reality that implied that the online world is a coherent space and unique and different from the offline.

Wittel (2000: 21) finds that work focused solely on virtual life should not be called ethnography. He concludes that "research in virtual spaces can only become virtual fieldwork if the research is multi-sited in a very physical sense such as when it is present in schools, Internet cafes, work places and in private living spaces". He argues that if we are to conduct research in single-sites, and purely examine virtual spaces, we should not be calling it ethnography, but rather conversation analysis, text analysis or discourse analysis.

Slater and Miller (2000), in their renowned book, *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*, attempt to transcend the many dualisms in researching online communication – real/virtual, global/local, and subject/object. They study the use of the Internet in Trinidad, taking into account cultural subtleties, metaphors, and idioms that allow users to understand and use the technologies in a way that is particular to Trinidadian culture. They convince us that the concept of 'virtuality' is not fruitful, as it creates a misleading impression that behaviors, norms and values can be removed from their social context.

Kendall (1999: 60) also suggests in her chapter 'Recontextualizing Cyberspace' that we should not only take into account participants' local off-line environments and explore how participants blend their on-line and off-line lives and social contexts, but also consider the role of larger social institutions affecting on-line participation. She argues that nobody lives in cyberspace alone and off-line realities impinge and intertwine with online interactions. Along with other researchers (Tacchi el al, 2004), she calls for the study of the users' offline lives and the social, political, economic and cultural environments that they live in, in order to understand how they appropriate these technologies.

In her book *Virtual Ethnography* (2000), Christine Hine argues that we should not view the Internet as only a culture in its own right as it leaves us unclear about the ways in which offline and online interactions relate to and impact on each other. Nor can we see it as a 'cultural artifact' as this will miss the sense in which the Internet is itself a social context. Hine (ibid) argues that we should view the Internet as both a culture and a cultural artifact. She says that an ethnography of the Internet as both a culture in its own right and a cultural artifact would concern itself with the contexts

in which it was used and the way in which it fitted into and transformed existing understandings (ibid).

As such, the method used to study bloggers in Syria and Lebanon will treat the online and offline world not as two separate entities, but ones that continuously feed into each other. It will take into account the importance of the offline context and institutions that may hinder or encourage people's Internet access; this information will be collected through interviews with people working on Internet development projects in the area, ISP managers and visiting Internet cafes. It will also take into account the online environments of bloggers through online participant observation and face-to-face interviews in which bloggers guide me through their online activities.

In this regard, an innovative approach was developed so as to reconcile online and offline methodologies, thereby adding to the literature on Internet methodologies. The face-to-face interviews all occurred with a computer present, during which time bloggers were asked to give a 'tour' of their blogs. In this manner, they would usually recount (while demonstrating online) why they began to blog, what their blog title means, and who they linked to and why – often pointing to specific posts or comments they or others had contributed to the blog. Additionally, they were asked to guide me to other bloggers to whom they linked, thus explaining their relationships online and mapping out those they interact with (both online and offline). I have found that this method was able to de-personalise the face-to-face interaction by having a screen to revert to, and at the same time allowed me to observe how the offline world can seep into the online world and vice-versa. This shaped my attempt at bridging the dichotomy of carrying out either a purely virtual or purely offline investigation.

3.2 An overview of methods used

3.2.1 Fieldwork

The first fieldwork session took place in March 2008. During that time, I conducted 13 exploratory open-ended, face-to-face interviews with Lebanese bloggers (LB1, LB2, LB3, LB4, LB5, LB6, LB7, LB8, LB9) and Syria bloggers (SB1, SB2, SB3, SB4); three interviews with ISPs in Lebanon (ISP1, ISP2) and in Syria (ISP3); attended one blogger face-to-face meeting in Lebanon; and interviewed people working on Internet development projects in Lebanon and Syria. Miscellaneous fieldwork activities included visiting several Internet cafes in Damascus and different areas of Lebanon, less structured conversations over coffee and/or lunch with bloggers, as well as exchanging informal emails with bloggers abroad. The second fieldwork session took place in January 2009, during which time I conducted four more interviews with Lebanese bloggers (LB10, LB11, LB12, LB13) and six more with Syrians (SB5, SB6, SB7, SB8, SB9, SB10). Second follow-up interviews were also conducted with two Syrian bloggers (SB2, SB1)[18] and one Lebanese (LB3).

Through template analysis, themes from the interviews of the first fieldwork session were extracted. These themes were the foundation of a semi-structured questionnaire that was sent out in October 2008 and closed in December 2008 (some of the very same sentences and wording that bloggers articulated were put into the questionnaire[19]). The questionnaire allowed for standardisation of questions across the whole sample, access to the bloggers that I could not reach in person, and had the advantage of anonymity that many bloggers in this context appreciated. The results of the questionnaire were re-validated and re-questioned during the second session of interviews with bloggers, which took place in January 2009. The data collection fieldwork phases were scheduled with a substantial gap between them to enable re-assessment and re-working of data that had been collected in the first phase. Informal online participant observation was conducted throughout the entire research period (September 2006–present). I classify this observation as informal because I did not devise a systematised method for my observations such as a regular schedule or a

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[18] See Appendix A for the complete list of interviews and dates.
[19] See Appendix D for online questionnaire.

structured way of browsing blogs. Rather than compiling consistent field notes on these observations I added supplementary notes or screenshots of things I found interesting. I regularly visited the Lebanese and Syrian country blog aggregators, Global Voices and a number of other blogs and I naturally allowed conversations and links to direct me to other bloggers. I had also maintained my own blog, thesuffragettes.blogspot.com, along with a friend since 2004, but stopped updating it in 2007. Between 2004 and 2006, there was a very small community of bloggers from Lebanon and we were part of it, often interacting on the aggregator forum and with individual bloggers. Between 2004- 2006, our blog posts were about our everyday lives in London, yet by 2007, I was consumed with the research of the PhD and had began to post articles on blogging on the blog. It began to feel like a forced and half-hearted contribution to blogging. While before we were writing like everyone else, it became a research blog and felt like an invasion of the world of bloggers, which they take for granted. In effect, I could not interact anymore with other bloggers I was researching in the same way. So I stopped updating it and deleted the research related posts.

As of December 2008, I became involved in the BBC World Service Trust (WST) project titled 'Developing Socially Responsible Media Platforms in the Arab World', as mentioned in the introduction chapter. As such, several 'scoping trips' to Syria and Lebanon were made with the project team, during which we met with media observers, researchers, journalists, bloggers and social media experts. Scoping trips took place in April 2009, June 2009, October 2009, January 2010 and March 2010. Travelling to Syria and Lebanon several times after having completed the PhD fieldwork sessions proved extremely beneficial, enabling me to build longer lasting relationships with bloggers interviewed in both Lebanon and Syria through these regular visits. I also had the opportunity to meet with media experts in the field of communication, telecommunication, journalism and development that would not have otherwise been possible.

Along with the Research and Learning Group of the BBC WST, I also designed a small-scale Internet cafe research in Syria and Lebanon in 2009. Four cafes in each city were researched and two questionnaires were constructed, one for cafe owners and one for cafe visitors. For each café, two visits were made by a researcher to

interview four customers at different times of day, as well as interviewing each cafe owner/manager. In total, 16 customers and four owners were interviewed in each city. The interviews were conducted by two researchers in Beirut and Damascus, who I personally briefed face-to-face; one of the researchers was a blogger I had previously interviewed (SB2). My visits to Internet cafes during my first phase of fieldwork informed the construction of the questionnaire. Moreover, the results of the cafe research have also been useful as background information for Chapter 4 of the PhD (see Chapter 4.2.2). Another small research discussion thread was initiated on Al Mudawen, the Syrian blog aggregator, as part of the BBC project. This thread asked Syrian bloggers questions about which of their activities and skills they would like to develop further. The discussion thread was to help shape the online component of the project's media training program targeted at bloggers, would-be bloggers and young journalists in Syria, with the ultimate project objective of raising awareness of editorial standards, interactive online tools and online innovations. See Appendix K for the Al Mudawen Syrian blogger discussion.

3.2.2 Access to bloggers

The initial challenge encountered was gaining access to the object of the study – bloggers themselves. An attempt was first made to pick a random sample of bloggers from the country blog aggregators[20]. While this would have allowed me to access bloggers in an equal and systematic method, the response rate was low. This was due to either aggregators being out of date (many listed had either stopped blogging or moved location) or very likely, subjects' reluctance to reply to a stranger asking questions about their blogging, especially accompanied by a request to meet face-to-face.

Due to the particularities of the context of the region and the low response rate from a randomised call for face-to-face meetings, I then contacted all the bloggers I had communicated with previously (those who had answered the survey sent out during

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[20] Both Lebanon and Syria have country aggregator websites whereby a group of bloggers (administrators) maintain and update them. Usually URLs of Lebanese or Syrian blogs are spotted by the admins and added to the lists or the bloggers themselves can email the admins and ask to be added on the forum's list. Lebanon's web forum: http://www.lebanonheartblogs.blogspot.com, Syria's web forum: http://www.syplanet.com/

my MA disserpation) and asked them to disseminate my request among their own networks. Some bloggers were also contacted through two Facebook groups called 'Syrian bloggers' and 'Lebanese bloggers'. Only one person answered the call but we never managed to meet due to time constraints. This seemed, at the time, to be the most reasonable way to gain access to a somewhat closed social circle, particularly in Syria.

Most of the interviews that eventually occurred were a result of pragmatic sampling. This method allowed bloggers to posit the researcher as an unthreatening outsider and provided some reassurance about having face-to-face encounters. Interestingly, many felt it their duty to meet as a favour to their friend. For example, the blogger 3arabiyat (the first blogger I interviewed in Syria and subsequently my main means of contact with other Syrian bloggers) rejected all of my initial requests for interviews even when they came with recommendations from other bloggers. She did not respond until some very good friends of hers actively encouraged her to make contact with me. She wrote by email on 7 March 2008:

> I believe xxx told me about you, and I was hesitant to get together because of my type of blogging.... however, I know Firas and Bashir quite well, and for them I am glad to be at any assistant to you [sic]. I am in Beirut right now, let me know if you prefer to have the interview here or in Damascus…

Clearly this form of sampling has inherent problems. The key one I faced was that many of the bloggers I was referred to were prominent and active with large followings. In making recommendations, bloggers were apparently compelled to guide me towards what they thought were the 'good' blogs, despite my plea that I want to interview anyone, regardless of their output and focus. This perhaps skewed the sample, as the majority of those interviewed came from the more active and popular segment of the blogosphere.

Interviews in Syria were primarily conducted in coffee shops or restaurants with wireless Internet access (mostly in the old city of Bab Touma). These were the most practical options as well as having the advantage of being neutral, public and relatively inconspicuous. In Lebanon, however, most interviews took place either in

the office space the researcher had rented out or a cafe that would be convenient to the location of the blogger. Likewise a convenient time and place for the meeting was usually arranged by phone. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and 2.5 hours. They were recorded using a digital recorder and transcribed personally by the researcher. They were usually carried out in Arabic with some English as appropriate. Directly after each interview, further 'field-notes' were written, reporting pertinent themes and general impressions gleaned throughout the interview.

3.2.3 Interview methods

Tactical understanding of the interview process was informed by Holstein and Gubrium's (1997) approach to 'active interviewing' as well as Bourdieu's concepts of 'habitus' and 'field'. Holstein and Gubrium's approach aims to strike a balance between the 'what' of the interview process (what was asked, what was conveyed) and the 'how' (the meaning- making process, the interactional, narrative procedures of knowledge production). Thus, unlike the traditional view of the interview – consisting of an interviewee with a repository of information ready to be given to the interviewer if he/she asks the questions properly – the interactional nature of interviews is acknowledged and taken as a rich source of data and to be reflexively utilised rather than perceived as an inherent obstacle.

With this view in mind, the interviewer must realise that the data obtained from an interview will never be completely pure. The interview process itself, the researcher's identity, the power relations at hand and the research subject matter all have an effect on what is being said and how it is being said. With this in mind, and following the advice of Holstein and Gubrium (1997), a consciously active role was sought in the interview encounter. While leading and standard questions were asked of all subjects in order to draw comparisons, the peculiarities of each interaction were acknowledged and where appropriate probed, inviting exploration and animation of particular issues, suggesting alternative perspectives and sometimes offering interpretations. How recipients reacted to these questions and interpretation was sometimes just as meaningful as the questions themselves. As Holstein and Gubrium (Ibid: 124) point out, "discussion of topics, while being deeply significant, may nonetheless be relatively rare in the normal course of everyday life, even in the

interview society … active interviewers can thus use this to gain purchase on interpretive practice relating to matters that may be not be casually topical, yet which are socially relevant". This is made through inciting the interviewee to talk about issues that may not be deemed relevant to the interviewee or be effectively captured in their natural habitat – in this case the online world (ibid). The interviewer must also be prepared to keep re-assessing and re-working data in an iterative fashion.

While this interactional form of interviewing that Holstein and Gubrium suggest is helpful in the interview process (particularly in enabling a balance between the process and substance of the interview), researchers must not assume that the truth of any interaction is to be found within the interaction itself (Bourdieu, 1989: 16). Overlooking the socio-political construction of the conversation can distort the interpretation of the event itself by "missing a reality that escapes the immediate intuition because it resides in structures that are transcendent to the interaction they inform" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 144). Therefore, while the methods advocated by Holstein and Gubrium were followed, as they allowed the researcher to be an active participant in the interview process and show the reader the '*hows* and *whats* of the narrative dramas conveyed" (ibid: 125), the researcher consistently took into account the objective wider social space that interviewees occupy.[21]

I also benefited from the opportunity to conduct follow-up interviews with a number of informants; this enabled me to probe and gather responses to themes and perspectives that were being developed throughout transcription and later stages of enquiries. Many of those interviewed became contacts on my Gmail instant messenger and were glad to respond to follow-up questions. During my numerous BBC WST visits to Lebanon and Syria, I also met with many of the interviewees again; several of them subsequently became involved in the BBC project (SB2, LB4, LB6).

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[21] This is a classic Objectivist/Subjectivist or Structuralist/Constructivist dialectical argument that Bourdieu (1989) aims to overcome by taking into account the minute details and interaction of people but at the same time embedding it relation to the objective social space they occupy.

3.3 Qualitative/Quantitative debates: Using questionnaires in ethnography

Methodological debates in the social sciences have often made clear cut dichotomies and stark philosophical as well as practical distinctions between qualitative and quantitative methods/researchers. In relation to ethnography, much debate has focused on whether quantitative data can and should be included at all (Bernard, 1994, Hammersley, 1992, Clifford, 1988). While many anthropologists have combined survey research with participant observation, Bernard (1994: 288) argues that "the basic principles to which anthropology adheres, studying the micro from the native view point in the local settings, would make the use of statistical quantitative data seem almost antithetical to its very principles". The debate has often led researchers to abandon or pursue one methodology over another, based on their ideological commitment to the particular methodological paradigm rather than on the nature of the phenomena they are describing and the epistemological and practical issues most applicable to that particular context (Hammersley, 1992: 163). Hammersley (1992) analyses this debate in detail in his book *What is Wrong with Ethnography?* He believes that ethnography as a general approach often misleads the researcher, not only about the range of options available but also about the basis on which choices between options should be made. He concludes that quantitative and qualitative methodologies are not necessarily contradictory, distinctions between them are of limited use and one should employ the most 'appropriate' methodology (or methodologies) according to the nature of the subject being studied (ibid: 202)[22]. Other social scientists, like Bourdieu, who have stressed the importance of ethnographic and qualitative methods, also advocate of the use of quantitative and large scale statistical data because they take us beyond what is available to individual experience and perception (Crossley, 2005:78).

In this dissertation, the use of an online semi-structured questionnaire is deemed conducive to the study at hand. Yet as Schensul et al (1999) propose, ethnography can be informed by qualitative and quantitative approaches only if the quantitative questions are informed by already collected qualitative data. Indeed, what

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[22] For details on the distinction made and philosophical arguments on this topic, see Hammersley (1994).

differentiates the standard quantitative questionnaire from one that is informed by the ethnographic position is that the former is based a priori on the researcher's experience or theoretical perspective using instruments established for other purposes and other populations, while the latter is based on 'locally based formative ethnographic research' (Schensul et al. 1999, 167). Weller and Romley (1988: 7) emphasise the importance of beginning research with informal exploratory interviews with informants to define the area of inquiry and obtain a general notion of what to expect. Indeed, it is important that the boundaries and layers of the research questions are defined by the informants in their own language, rather than that of the researcher.

The very foundation of constructing the questionnaire to be sent out to bloggers in Lebanon and Syria was informed by the local (socio-economic, political and cultural) context, all of the questions designed were derived the material received from bloggers during the exploratory ethnographic fieldwork conducted in March 2008. One of the key advantages of sending out a questionnaire was increased reach. I was able to access a wider population of bloggers that were geographically and arguably sociably inaccessible[23]. Moreover, due to the sensitivity of the material some bloggers posted and the anonymity they seek to achieve, an electronic questionnaire was clearly an appropriate tool in this context. The main objective of the questionnaire was to further probe key questions and to test emerging themes. Several new themes emerged in responses to the questionnaire that were not extrapolated from the initial exploratory fieldwork. These themes were then further developed and clarified through face-to-face semi-structured interviews that were carried out after the questionnaire was closed and analysed and during the second field work session. Therefore the questionnaire was informed by the first fieldwork session and subsequently tested afterwards through further fieldwork.

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[23] Syrian bloggers residing outside of Damascus were not interviewed. Moreover, many 'anonymous' bloggers would not meet face to face with someone they do not know. One anonymous blogger I interviewed in Damascus, Fadi (SB), was extremely uncomfortable and nervous about meeting me. He later confessed during the interview that he was so worried he had informed friends and family of exactly where we are meeting and the time, in case I turned out to be undercover security.

3.3.1 Template analysis

Template analysis was used to code the ethnographic interviews with bloggers from the first fieldwork session into themes on which to base the questionnaire. Template analysis is a qualitative method of analysing any form of textual data, including interviews, personal correspondence and focus groups (King, 1998). Since the first fieldwork session was exploratory and the methods conducted were ethnographic in intent, no *a priori* themes were selected to test on the text that emerged from the interviews. Instead, themes were extrapolated from the texts. Each interview was scrutinised individually and the ideas that emerged were documented on small cards. Each new interview produced new themes, yet themes that were similar were then grouped then titled under broader themes. While computer software could have been employed for this task, coding by hand allowed for a more contextual approach, as I was able to interpret and integrate the context in which sentences, gestures and replies were made. After an initial exploration of the interviews, preliminary codes for three interviews from each country were developed. This is called an *initial coding manual* which was then applied to the rest of the text and amended where applicable. If new interviews revealed new issues or themes, more codes were added. Lebanon and Syria produced similar broad themes but as may be expected, some themes emerged that were country-specific.

The technique was used in a flexible way, taking account multiple potential interpretations of the data. Sentences were not treated in isolation, but rather considered each in the context in which it was uttered. In coding comments under themes I transcribed full sentences as articulated by each blogger. Each interview was coded in a different colour so I was able to differentiate between each blogger and thus consider the context in which things were being said. So while bloggers' interviews were grouped under certain themes, I could still see who said what, and what was said exactly. Themes therefore provided guidelines to help organise material and build the questionnaire, rather than as a means of providing conclusive analysis.

The main themes that emerged in Lebanon were Motivations, Autonomy, Blog distinctions, Opinion of blogosphere, Audiences, Interaction and Anonymity. The

same themes emerged in Syria, except for autonomy. Moreover some of the sub-headings were very different. The discrepancies and similarities between the two counties were all re-questioned and re-worked with the analysis of the questionnaire and my following fieldwork efforts.

3.3.2 Questionnaire construction

The questionnaire was based on the main themes that emerged from the template data analysis. It consisted of four pages titled: The blog, Anonymity, Interaction & Opinion and Demographics (See Appendix D). The first page consisted of questions regarding the respondents' blogs, for example the date of formation, the language blogged in, motivation for blogging and topics written about, Since the motivations for blogging produced many variables from the interviews and many bloggers had mentioned multiple reasons for starting blogs, a ranking question was included to ascertain which motivations were most important. While many respondents during the interview mentioned the reason why they chose to blog, then later mentioned other motivations for blogging, two questions related to this were devised. One asked them why they began to blog in the first place, using a ranking system of what was the most important feature, and another question asked what they regard to be the most important aspect of blogging.

The second page consisted of questions on anonymity, what it is that compels them to reveal their actual name and what is it that compels them to remain anonymous. The third page was on interaction with other bloggers and their opinions of blogospheres. Questions asked related to who they link to, who they have met through face-to-face encounters, and how they link their blog with other social networking tools such as Facebook. Other questions were on their perceptions of blogging and how they value it. Many bloggers had been very opinionated on the blogosphere during interviews. They defined it, explained its formation and those who participate in it. Statements made during the interviews were put into the questionnaire as a likert-scale system. This allowed the researcher to post statements made by bloggers and test how many agreed or disagreed with them. Likert-scales allow respondents to place themselves on an attitude continuum for each statement. The neutral position was removed as it is been shown (Nowlis et al, 2000) that

respondents are always more likely to choose that option when initially unsure of what they think, thereby precluding further thought and potentially uncovering a clear opinion.

Demographic questions were also asked at the end of the questionnaire; these included age, religious affiliation, gender, country of origin, country of residence, profession and education. Socioeconomic and demographic questions are often not only threatening to respondents (especially those who fear being identified) but can also be boring and distracting. Towards the end, survey respondents are less likely to stop the questionnaire because of socio-economic questions (Bernard, 1994: 278). Instead issues directly related to their blog were placed at the beginning of the questionnaire. A comment box was left at end of the questionnaire, where respondents were allowed to add additional comments on any issue they feel is important to them or blogging.

Bloggers were also asked if they are on any of the blog aggregator forums in order to see where the respondents were coming from and how many of them are on aggregators. Almost all the questions had an 'other' option. This was done to draw out any new data that may have been overlooked. It has been revealed that people are least threatened by questions when they can offer their own answers on a self-administered questionnaire, as opposed to being forced to choose amongst a set of fixed alternatives (Bernard, 1994: 268).

3.3.3 Questionnaire adaptation

The questionnaire was sent out in both English and Arabic. I wrote it first in English and then had it translated into Arabic by a certified translator. After the translation was completed, adaptation was needed so that both versions of the questionnaire were not only linguistically but also culturally equivalent. For a questionnaire to be equal in different languages and thus for the data emerging from both to be comparable, researchers must ensure that the questionnaire is understood by the respondents in the same way. Words, sentences or questions that have alternate meanings, different levels of intensity, nuances or connotations might be deemed

equivalent by a translator but not by particular respondents (Daouk et al, 2005). There are of course risks and disadvantages that the researcher must acknowledge when not only constructing but also analysing material from multi-language questionnaires. The researcher cannot possibly control how people will interpret questions on self-administered questionnaires. An attempt was made to mitigate against this risk by pilot testing the survey with a group of bloggers.

The researcher found a panel of two bilingual speakers to review the questionnaire. The first review was conducted with Lina Daouk-Oyri, a certified psychometrican and bi-lingual speaker of Arabic and English. The second took place with Layal Ftouni, an English and Arabic-speaker from Lebanon. As a result of these reviews, the researcher amended a substantial number of words and sentences. Some words were found to have no equivalent meanings or connotations in Arabic and thus the English wording was changed too. There was no rigidity in adapting the Arabic version to the English version or vice versa but both were changed and altered so as to be equal. There were some words that bilingual speakers could not identify either. For example, there is no one word for anonymity in Arabic; the term 'identity unknown' was used instead. Bloggers that the researcher knew from Lebanon and Syria were contacted to obtain advice on vocabulary specific to online activity. A lack of standardisation of Internet language is particularly apparent with Arabic terminology; the most appropriate way of assessing and selecting appropriate language in this case was to ask those who use it daily and online. An example is "blog aggregator". Since there is no direct translation for aggregator, bloggers were contacted from both Lebanon and Syria to find out the terms used for country forum aggregators in Arabic; following these consultations the word blog forum was used to describe these aggregator efforts.

Additionally, some wording was changed because of the language level of some respondents. On page four, question five for example, on religious affiliation, the English version was changed from Agnostic to "not decided yet". This change was made not only because there is no equivalent in Arabic to agnostic, but also because it is not a common word used by English speakers in the region either.

Once the questionnaire was validated and adjusted, I piloted the Arabic and English questionnaire with four bloggers from Lebanon and Syria (two in English and two in Arabic). Piloting identified a critical issue relating to anonymity that had been completely overlooked. A question had asked bloggers whether they were anonymous or not. However, one blogger who participated in the pilot said she had two blogs – one in which she was anonymous and the other in which she was not. A third option was subsequently added to the questionnaire to enable this information to be proactively collected.

The questionnaire was then typed into survey monkey – an online survey toolkit that provides an online link to the questionnaire to distribute to potential respondents. I then rigorously advertised the questionnaire to blogs taken from the blog aggregator forums. Every fifth blogger listed on the aggregator was contacted personally through email if that was provided on their blog or through the commenting system. They were provided with basic information about the questionnaire and directed to the link in English and Arabic to fill out the questionnaire and pass it on (see Appendix E for the text sent to call for questionnaire). The questionnaire's link was also sent it to all bloggers I had had contact with by email and they were urged to pass the link on to other bloggers. The survey was also advertised on the "Syrian bloggers", "Lebanon bloggers" and "Arab bloggers" groups on Facebook.

A total of 66 responses were received. Thirty-seven were bloggers of Syrian origin and 29 were Lebanese[24]. The sample was skewed for a number of reasons. First, the response rate was very low, although I did not contact bloggers who had not posted on their blog for more than six months. I was also not able to tell which of the respondents came from the random call via the forum aggregators and which came from contacts of bloggers I had interviewed. If many of the respondents were friends of friends of bloggers I interviewed, this could have an effect on how representative the sample is of bloggers.

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[24] Three people responded who were neither from Lebanon and Syria and thus were excluded.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

There have been a great deal of ethical debates concerning doing research on the Internet especially in the realm of dealing with human subjects. Whether online or offline, there is always a contradictory pull between providing as much information about our research subjects as possible so as provide more context for the reader or conversely making them anonymous to preserve their privacy to the utmost degree. (Morley, 2007: 79). Studying online environments confronts us with new challenges especially with regards to the blurring of the public and private realm. These ethical considerations have been debated by researchers studying the Internet (Berry 2004, Bakardjieva 2004, Bakardjieva & Feenberg 2001, Buchanan 2004, Clark 2004). Since there are insufficient guidelines reflecting the use of public data, it is often the responsibility of the researcher to make decisions with regard to activities such as quoting or reflecting names or pseudonyms in their ultimate publications, and should indeed do so in mind of some the issues raised in the literature (Walther, 2002)

3.4.1 Using interview data

All bloggers interviewed agreed to have their interviews recorded and published, with some bloggers asking that some of the conversation be put off the record. However, during the writing up stage of the research, I also decide to send all those interviewed a consent form, which reflected the degree of anonymity they wished to have in the final publication. The consent form I sent them (in Appendix C) allowed them to choose whether they wanted their full name and blog details to be published, whether they wanted their full name but with no link to their blog to be published, or conversely their blog published but not their name. The fourth option reflected whether they wanted full anonymity. Most of the interviewees agreed to have their name and blog URL published, with a few asking to remain anonymous and a couple who asked that their blog URL be published but be not associated with their real name. The consent form was sent at a much later stage in the research because of two factors. Firstly, I had a clearer idea of how I was going to be using the information they provided me in the interview and/or from the content of their blog and thus could answer questions concerning quotes used and the type of background

information I conveyed. . Secondly, after the fieldwork trips and writing up Chapter 6, I was made more aware of the ambiguity of anonymity many bloggers experienced. On the hand, I considered using pseudonyms for all the informants, yet placing the URLs of their blogs in an appendix so as to allow the reader a chance to browse through the blogs that provided much of the research content. However, after careful consideration, I took the decision to neither provide their full name nor their weblog addresses. . This decision was based on a number of important factors. Firstly, many bloggers are not aware of the level of anonymity they have and have not reflexively thought much about it. In fact, many bloggers emailed the form back to me without signing it and asking me to quote them as I see fit. As discussed in Chapter 6.3.2, while some bloggers may *feel* anonymous, because of their limited audience, they may not have necessarily reflected on the content they post or say and who may eventually be viewing. In this regard, the consent form may have not been properly read or thought about. Syrian blogger, Mischa, for example, said that she doesn't give out her blog URL to her family and while she is aware that they could easily find her since she writes her full name explicitly, yet she doesn't think they will read her blog. She said "I chose not to be anonymous anymore, well it's more credible and I'm pretty careless'. She stated that her father did indeed once google her and came across her blog, but he only read her last post which was on a political issue rather than a personal one. Secondly, bloggers perceive their audience to be other bloggers from their own country and in most of these tight nit communities; there is a level of trust concerning identities even when bloggers are anonymous online. Indeed, a key aspect of online communities is that they are bound by mutual respect and trust amongst their members (Berry, 2004: 326). This was highlighted by some of my respondents, who although anonymous, revealed their identity to other bloggers. One Lebanese blogger, who remains anonymous for reasons of security and risk to his job, still felt a degree of safety amongst the community of bloggers in Lebanon. He said "I attend some offline meetings between bloggers [even though I'm anonymous]…I don't know there is a level of trust between bloggers even of they oppose your views'.

In addition I personally got to know most of the bloggers I interviewed during the course of the research fairly well, continuing much discussion over gmail chat, informal coffees and emails. Some of the interviewees also eventually began to work

on the BBC project I was involved in after the fieldwork sessions. In this sense, subjects who get to know the researcher and develop a personal relationship are likely to develop a level of trust, which minimizes the perceived risks of the research and makes the researcher seem less ambiguous and more simply another group member (Clark, 2004: 252). One blogger emailed me the consent form left blank and wrote in an email:

> I can't remember what we talked about! As you wish, really, I trust you. If I'm saying something stupid, better not quote me so "I hereby authorize you to quote me in your thesis paper as you see fit". Good enough?

Indeed, an interview, especially an unstructured one that allows the conversation to flow is personal to many degrees and many people may not remember everything that was articulated or reflect before they gave me information and let me in on their personal lives, thoughts and habits. The bloggers I interviewed whose details may make their identities discernable in the thesis, such as the case of Syrian blog aggregator author, were personally contacted and asked permission to use information about them. Similarly, all survey respondents, whether they added their name to their survey or not, were also made anonymous. Identifying the survey respondents did not necessary substantiate their comments or responses. I did however provide the URLs of the respondents. In this instance, I do not think that providing a URL gave away too much information that they may eventually regret.

The decision to give them all anonymity was a difficult one, bearing in mind that many bloggers did not mind having their blog URL or their full name published in the thesis, While there is a risk that providing their full details will protect them from questionable or future harm or distress, it places them in a very passive position (Bakardiejva et al, 2004: 340) and many of those I interviewed felt that they were an active part of the research process. Therefore putting their real names cites them as the authors of their thoughts and valued comments on the state of blogging at that time. Moreover, their wish to have their identities published or URL cited could be a reflection of their desire for more exposure for their blog.

3.4.2 Using public content on the Internet

While there has been much debate on the use of information gathered through lurking in private forums and chat rooms, content on blogs is usually publicly available for anyone to view. Newspaper articles and magazines often quote bloggers without their consent and most ethical standards indicate that researchers can use public information (that requires no password or registration) without the permission of the author. Yet, could the reproduction of these public texts, not intended to be used for research, cause harm for those writing them? While some researchers have argued that any content or interaction produced in the public domain does not require the researcher to inform the participants of its use or get their consent (Paccagnella 1997, Herring 1996, Buckman 2002), others have argued that the perceived privacy of the public nature of the forums should be elicited. Yet perceived privacy and perceived anonymity are not always easy to discern. Even in the case of bloggers whose aim is often to get a large following, their ideas concerning their own privacy are often issues not reflected on. Bakardejiva and Freeman (2001) propose using the concept of non-alienation when researching public information on the Internet. Non-alienation means that if content is to be reproduced outside of its intended context, then the permission of the author must be asked. In the case of bloggers, they write to be read by anyone yet they do not necessary agree to be part of a research project, which will often analyse, cite and dissect their posts. Moreover, many bloggers often delete all traces of the blog content for different reasons. In the course of the research, many bloggers stopped blogging, some deleted parts of the content they had previously published, while others decided to start afresh with a new theme to their blogs. While ethical guidelines do not limit the practice of using public material online, it is the responsibility of the author to make an informed decision about getting informed consent.

As for the bloggers who I did not interview yet used material from their blog, I decided to ask their permission to do so through personal emails explaining scope of research and blog passages that were cited. Because I did not interview these bloggers and the information I knew about them only came through their public blog, I did feel the need to make them anonymous.

3.5 Reflexivity and the auto- ethnographer

This section is aimed at examining my own position against the backdrop of debates concerning auto-ethnography. Historically, anthropology has been about the study of the 'other'. In the 1970s, when (Western educated natives) began to study their own cultures, debates on the advantages and disadvantages that native anthropologists faced in the field emerged. Auto ethnographers were celebrated for their relative ease at gaining access to communities, their unlimited period of fieldwork spent and their familiarity with the language, symbols and cues. On the other hand, they were criticized for their inability to distance themselves from the object of their study, be able to spot subtle issues that may seem natural to insiders and achieve a neutral and objective perspective.

Fundamentally, the identity of the researcher or the location it takes place in should be irrelevant in an anthropological undertaking. However, recently there has been a sort of celebration of the auto-ethnographer and a stamp of authenticity given to those who speak from within. This sort of division of labour that is occurring is what Said in his article 'Orientalism reconsidered' (1985: 106)' calls 'possessive exclusivism', that is, 'the sense of being an excluding insider' by virtue either of experience.

This sort of establishment of boundaries of a territory according to ethnicity (or gender, class, race etc) is highly problematic as it is premised against the idea that non – Western culture is homogenous thus overlooking other forms of differences. Narayan in her article "How Native Is a "Native" Anthropologist?" argues that factors such as gender, sexual orientation, class, race, or sheer duration of contacts may at different times outweigh the cultural identity we associate with insider or outsider status (1993:671). Indeed, the variables that could interfere and effect our research and our relationship to those we study are numerous and complex.

Indeed, if anything being from Lebanon, where one's family name can indicate religion and therefore assumed political stance can, if anything, be more detrimental than beneficial especially if dealing with bloggers with extreme views. In effect, during my fieldwork session with bloggers from Lebanon, I avoided stating the

region I was from or my political stances. It was very important for me that I remain neutral. This is especially because my interviews came at a time in March 2008 when Lebanon was divided so fiercely between anti-government and pro-government supporters that the split was almost going to erupt into a civil war. Similarly, my being Lebanese in Syria has at many times meant that almost all of my subjects have wanted to me to state my position with regards to Syria and Syrian people. This is due to the tension between Lebanon and Syria in 2005, which resulted in a form of 'hate' campaign by many Lebanese towards the Syrians. In these situations I overplayed my position, as coming from a foreign institution in London who is not doing research that is political.

For Spivak, the celebration of the auto-ethnographer is a pitfall of reverse ethnocentrism, a confusion that restricts the possibility of constructing an alternative discourse without reproducing or being assimilated into the Eurocentric mode of thought. Spivak contends that "such an alternative postcolonial discourse is made possible only when the critic places himself or herself in an ambivalent position beyond the self/other dichotomy and constantly unlearns the norms and implications within and under which he or she is working"(cited in Kyung-Won Lee, 1997: 105). Narayan (1993), similarly, sees that a professional identity that involves problematising lived reality inevitably creates a distance (whether the researcher is from there or not).

While Spivak's and Narayan's suggestions of detachment from the object of study may never be fully attainable, however, simplifying the complexity of the relationship into that of an insider/outsider dichotomy is a reductionist approach. We need to start off with the premise that objectivity in the strictest sense is never fully attainable, that our data is not pure and that they are a product of our prior conceptual ideas, judgments and experience, regardless of our background. If we explicate our research methods, mapping out the bases for interferences and include ourselves as subjects of study (mapping out situation, actions, backgrounds, power relations that all play a role in the data), then perhaps researchers can discover what these biases may be and illuminate them to the readers of the text,

While my research could be considered a somewhat auto-ethnography of Lebanon (since I have spent the majority of my life in Lebanon), it is not my personal location that has (or has not) necessarily granted me a better position than someone else. Every fieldwork case study is complex and every interaction with subjects is fuelled with power relations. I will do my best to acknowledge and be aware of my position, acknowledging my being a subject in the research. Moreover, the comparison I will draw between Lebanon (being from there) and Syria (only visiting once as a child) may give me additional insight into how I deal and distance myself from Lebanon and how this relationship may or may not change while I'm in Syria. Wacquant aand Bourdieu revoked the dominant conception of ethnography as a heroic exploration of otherness and pioneered multi-sited ethnography as a means for controlling the construction of the object (Wacquant, 2004: 396). Bourdieu comparative ethnographies not only scrutinize the application of the method but also the method itself. He chooses a second site as a requirement of method and a resource for self-monitoring and epistemological safeguard (ibid) rather than a good place to draw a comparison as a phenomenon of society.

Chapter IV. Online Access & Inequalities

The Arab world, often treated as an amalgamated entity, is a region that is quite diverse. Consequently the way that the Internet has been integrated into society has been remarkably different in each country. According to Warf & Vincent (2006), Arab states with the best-developed Internet systems are those that have diversified their economies from petroleum, have competitive telecommunications markets, relatively equalized gender roles, numerous Internet-cafés and high rates of wireless phone usage. These are indeed important factors that can have a correlation with its integration rate, however, there are other numerous variables that have influenced and in some cases dictated the emergence of the Internet.

It is simplistic and incorrect to assume that one variable such as a competitive telecommunication market will lead to high Internet rates. The relationship between the two is not necessarily linear or straightforward (see Chapter 2.2). Multiple factors, both micro and symbolic as well as macro and structuring, together need to be looked at to explain why and how bloggers are using the Internet. Therefore, rather than starting with the big macro variables as a point of departure, this study explores what bloggers and other internet users say about their internet consumption and relates it back to structures surrounding them.

Lebanon for example, has one of the poorest telecoms infrastructures and was the last country to introduce ADSL in the Arab world, yet it has a higher penetration rate than the average Arab country[25] and was one of the first countries to adopt the internet profusely with the construction of local websites and set up of ISPs (Gonzalez-Quijano, 2003: 65-66). An International Telecommunication Union (ITU) report published in 2009[26] stated that the ratio of Internet users to the total population in Lebanon reached 26.28 per cent, which is higher than the average rate of 19.54 per cent in the MENA region. It is also higher than the global rate of 22.13 per cent. This shows that Lebanon enjoys a comparative advantage regionally and globally – despite its poor infrastructure. This is due to other factors that have influenced how the Internet is used. Many bloggers reiterated in interviews that blogging began with

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[25] http://www.internetworldstats.com/
[26] ITU, Measuring the Information Society, The ICT development Index, 2009 Edition. -Geneva, 16 March 2009

Lebanese abroad in industrialised nations. The high emigration rates amongst the youth and brain drain in Lebanon, is one factor that may have influenced the faster integration rate of the technology.

Syrian bloggers also have said that they see the Internet as an outlet for self expression in a society not set up to promote mingling and crossover between different layers. This is a factor that has allowed for social media such as forums to be popular amongst Internet users. The researcher who conducted work on Syrian Internet café users observed the large amount of use of chatting and forums. He believes that the use is even higher than reiterated by those interviewed and most people in Internet cafes go solely for that purpose. He added that most of the chatting on forums are between the opposite sexes and the Internet allows for this communication without being observed. He attributes this to general conservative attitudes in Syrian Society that limit relations between women and men.

Indeed, as discussed in the literature review, there are numerous factors that can influence how people may appropriate the Internet. The adoption and appropriation of the Internet depends on the interplay of a number of factors that are economic, political and cultural. The digital divide, as discussed in literature review is more than an issue of access. This chapter will treat it as a sociological phenomenon reflecting broader social, economic, cultural, and learning inequalities (Cho, 2003).

Most of the research collected in this thesis is from 2008 and 2009 so it is important to note that data on costs, speeds and infrastructure will ultimately change over time. This chapter aims to bring to light the current situation of Internet users in Lebanon and Syria and to explore the combination of factors at this point in time that have together contributed to constitute what the Internet means for people from Lebanon and Syria.

The indicator of Internet use is most often referred to as integration rate. When the term 'digital divide' is used, these figures indicate the development of the Internet in different national contexts. However, this chapter will begin by challenging the commonly held assumptions regarding these figures as was touched upon in literature review. The chapter will then map out the general impediments to Internet

access and examine the interplay between these impediments and other variables that effect its appropriation.

4.1 Access Issues

4.1.1 Evidence of under-counting

Figures from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU, 2009) estimated Lebanon's and Syria's Internet penetration figures at 23.9% and 10.8% respectively as of December 2008.

Table 4. 1 - Internet Penetration Figures (Lebanon and Syria)

Country	Users *Source: ITU*		Population *Source: world gazetteer*		% Population *Source: ITU*		Broadband **Sept/07** *Source: ITU*
Year	**2000**	**2008**	**2000**	**2008^n**	**2000**	**2008**	
Lebanon	300,000	950,000	2,424,422	3,971,941	5.8%	23.9%	170,000
Syria	30,000	2,132,000	17,868,100	20,472,148	0.2%	10.8%	5,600

Deborah Wheeler (2004, 2006) has criticised the way that connectivity figures are assessed by multiplying the number of ISP accounts by an avergae of two to four to users per account. . She believes that connectivity may be higher in the Arab world than conventional figures suggest because of the large numbers of users who use Internet cafés as alternative access points. In her study of Internet café users in Jordan and Cairo in 2002, she found that those who lack dial-up access at home, use cafes as a vital, alternative access point. She argues that in countries with a low degree of individual accounts via ISP subscriptions, there is a high prevalence of Internet cafés because there is high public demand for café-based connectivity services. Moreover, she argues, that connectivity rates are conventionally based on an average of 2-4 users per account, but in countries with generally larger families, the number of people sharing one account may be higher. Indeed, Warf and Vincent follow the same argument and state in their research that the number of users per ISP account can range from 0.6 in Qatar to 38.8 in Sudan, depending on the affordability of internet services, average family size and the number of public access points

(2006:86). Similarly, those with a broadband connection often share it with several neighbours residing in the same building.

While cafes are one alternative point of access, there are many other strategies that users use to overcome the high cost and slow states of Internet in the Arab world. Moreover, cafes are not often accessible to young women or those living in rural area. Another measure not accounted for in the standard Internet subscription rates is the prevalence of black-market ISPs. While black-market ISPs do not exist in Syria[27], they are very common in Lebanon. In 2005, approximately 35% of Internet users in Lebanon accessed the Internet through black market ISPs[28]. These ISPs are not counted for in the standard measurements. The Internet café research conducted in 2009 by the BBC World Service Trust in Beirut (see section 4.1.3) revealed that many users in different neighbourhoods, connected to the Internet via these black market ISPs. As one survey respondent in a café in Ashrafieh neighbourhood in Beirut said "We get pirated Internet. It's from the boys in the neighbourhood not Ogero or Cyberia [two of the main providers]. It's not always reliable in speed but it's cheaper". While black market ISPs provide slower broadband services, especially at peak times to their customers, the price can vary considerably. According to the same study, the average price of broadband access from one of the main ISP providers in Lebanon, as of May 2009, was approximately £35 not including set-up costs (price of modem etc), while the black market ISP offered the same connection, albeit not always as reliable, for 50,000 L.L (£20)[29]. These black market ISPs exist in most residential neighbourhoods in Lebanon. In a country like Lebanon, with expensive phone lines and a government that does not have an iron fist (in contrast to Syria), it is not surprising to find the emergence of the underground providers.

4.1.2 Market distortions affecting cost and speed

Internet access costs and speed are major hindrances to using the Internet effectively in Lebanon and Syria. High prices can be attributed to the fact that Internet providers in the region face higher operating costs, particularly for international

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[27] Information gathered from ISP providers and those interviewed in Internet cafes.
[28] Arab Advisors Group, Would legal ADSL service in Lebanon finally stamp out the ISP black market? 23 August 2005 [:http://www.arabadvisors.com/Pressers/presser-230805.htm]
[29] Information on cost of black market internet connection costs are from Internet café Research (see section 4.2.2)

bandwidth and the governments have centralised control over Internet operation locally. According to Jensen (2006), a lack of international optic fibre infrastructure, which is necessary to deliver sufficient volumes of low-cost bandwidth and the consequent dependency on much more expensive satellite bandwidth is one of the major problems affecting internet penetration in third world countries. Indeed, the cost of international bandwidth was quoted to be a major hindrance to Internet Service Providers. As the managing director of one of the major ISP providers (SB1) in Lebanon said, 'E1 (1 megabit) costs £2,350 [in Lebanon] whereas in Jordan it is £335/ E1 and in Europe much lower. If ISPs want to offer a high capacity to the end user, it will have to be priced even higher and will not be comparable to [the prices they pay] in Europe'. Moreover, the governments in Lebanon and Syria both have complete ownership over the Internet infrastructure. Sami Sunna, an Arab Advisors Group analyst, said in a research report that 'all of Lebanon's ISPs either get their internet bandwidth through the government's leased lines or via satellite operators for additional downlink-only bandwidth after acquiring permission from the Ministry of Telecommunications'[30].

In Lebanon, Ogero and a few private companies called Data Service Providers (DSPs) share the market[31]. While there is no monopoly over ISPs, Ogero, an ISP owned by the telecommunication ministry, operates in a market with commercial entities. Hadi Hazim (ISP2), the technical manager at Terranet, one of the main ISP's in Lebanon, said:

> Each ISP is given capacity by the Ministry. The telecommunication ministry or Ogero is a competitor so it is not based on a fair competition. There is a negotiation process, say you ask for 60 megabit and they give you 20. There is demand but supply is much less than demand.

He added, "on top of that, the overall [international] capacity coming to Lebanon is small". Kamal Shehadi head of the Telecomm regulatory Agency (TRA) explains |in an interview with NowLebanon (2007) that "Ogero and the ministry have control

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[30] Arab Advisors Group, 'A local Internet node in Lebanon: A good move', Dec 12, 2001.
[31] Information obtained from website [www.braodbandlebanon.org]. It was set up by the Lebanese Broadband Stakeholders Group (LBSG), a coalition of individuals, non- profit organizations, professional associations, and businesses with a viable interest in broadband and its related services. The aim of the website is to demand affordable and reliable broadband in Lebanon. [http://www.broadbandlebanon.org]

over a number of resources, including international bandwidth. And they basically favour their own services and have shown a bias against the private sector ISPs and DSPs. There are no proper procedures within Ogero and the ministry today to make sure that the requests for connection to ADSL are properly served and in an equal fashion". Similarly in Syria, two ISP providers are government owned and operate along with commercial ISPs. In Lebanon and Syria, there has also been a delay in building the national backbones needed to carry local and international traffic because of the huge amounts of investments it requires. Thus the data is presently being transported over the existing fixed line telephone network[32]. This infrastructure problem is the main cause of slowness, as ISPs in Lebanon and Syria said in interviews (ISP1, ISP2, ISP3).

Lebanon was the last country in the Arab world to introduce ADSL, although the equipment for launching ADSL was available as of 2003. Decisions made to distribute broadband in different areas are not only based on demand but also on equilibrium between different areas according to its sectarian make-up. An ISP manager (ISP1) of one the main providers in Lebanon who wished to remain anonymous for political sensitivities explained the delay:

> It is because of political and economic reasons. It was delayed by the central offices till 2007 whereas ADSL has been around since 1998….if we were allowed to lay our own fibre, to do the whole set up, then we would have offered it before 2007

The minimum speed in which a connection is termed as broadband varies from country to country. The same manager (ISP1) said:

> We are calling it broadband but it is 128 to 56 Kbps (Kilo bits per sec). In Europe it is 8 Mbps (Mega bits per sec), 16 megabits sometimes 20megabits. I don't think a 20 megabit is broadband and 1megabit is broadband too so yes we have a big problem

A slow and expensive Internet connection can hinder people's Internet use and the process can be extremely frustrating resulting in a completely different experience

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[32]http://www.broadbandlebanon.org/FAQ.aspx?pageid=84&PID=1#q94

and usage of the Internet from other parts of the world with a fast and reliable Internet connection.

Given the high costs of broadband subscriptions and low availability in many rural areas, the majority of Internet users in 2008 were still using Dial-up. Around 60% of Internet users in Lebanon in 2008 were still using dial-up, mostly because their area of residence does not have ADSL coverage, or because wireless broadband is too expensive (information from ISP1 and ISP2). Broadband costs around $35-45/month [£30]. The price does not include the purchase of a modem and set-up costs, which are around $200 [£135]. Those with a wireless device (that can also be used on their laptops) paid up to 120 000LL (£60-70) for their connections and had unlimited download from 12-8 am. Moreover, according to the Arab Advisors Group[33], the broadband speeds of 256 and 512kps have a download limit of les than 5GB. Dial-up, on the other hand, costs approximately £25/month for unlimited access (56K) and phone costs are 19,000 L.L [£8] for anything from one min to 25 hours a month. Black-market ISPs in Lebanon charge 50 000 LL (£20) a month (including set-up costs). However, according to the Internet café research respondents (see section 4.1.3) they are not as reliable as the main ISPs and are usually slower at peak times.

Rather than censorship, Lebanon's Internet users suffer from economic corruption, which has created a situation whereby it has one of the most expensive phone lines and Internet access costs in the world. The *DailyStar* newspaper issued a statement by the Lebanese Telecommunication Ministry on February 2009 announcing that Internet speeds in Lebanon are expected to become 20 times faster in two months once the country gets linked to a cable stretching from Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Syria[34]. Yet according to the ISPs in both Lebanon and Syria, there still needs to be a substantive amount of investment for developing broadband infrastructure, which will require huge investments.

The Syrian Telecommunication Establishment (STE) also owns the Internet datacomm backbone and the international backbone. The STE is expected to remain the monopoly operator for datacomm services till 2010. So while there are many

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[33] Arab Advisors Group, 'ADSL Rates in the Arab World: A Regional Comparison', December 2008,
[34] *Daily Star*, 'Lebanon to get higher-speed internet', 19 February 2009
[http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=3&article_id=99465]

ISPs in the market, it has not been completely liberalised. Broadband services have been introduced but on a very limited basis and most Internet users in Syria connect through dial-up on pre-paid scratch cards (information from statistics of ISP3). Only large companies can afford the few broadband lines. While the price of accessing the Internet for the average middle class family in the main cities (Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama) is relatively affordable, for the rest of the population it is still expensive. Five hours of connection (56K) costs approximately 100 Syrian Liras [£1] and dial up phone charges per hour are 10 liras [£0.1][35]. Broadband on the other hand is not only the most expensive in the region [for a country with one of the lowest GDP's], but it is also unavailable for the majority of the population. Broadband costs approximately £35 excluding the modem charges for one month at 256 kbps - the highest cost in the Arab world[36].

According to an Internet café owner in Damascus, 'dial-up is very available and not that expensive for an average young person but it is so slow that you end up hating the Internet'. This is especially the case with new websites that come with flash animations for their intros and require the downloading of high data packets, making the browsing process in Syria a very sluggish one. While most Syrians are used to pages taking over five minutes to load, poor Internet speeds are unnecessarily limiting many dial-up users from accessing basic information in a timely manner and might actually work to discourage use of many sites. If a site takes too long to access the user may give up.

An avid Syrian Internet user and blogger (SB5), when asked if he watches YouTube videos online, replied 'we cannot watch videos on the Internet at home [using dial-up]. Not in our dreams'[37]. When asked if he would go to an Internet café with a faster connection to watch the videos, he said 'honestly when the situation is like this, we just sacrifice watching them'. Downloading an email with a 2-megabyte attachment can take 7 minutes with a 56Kbps dial-up connection while 17 seconds with a 1Megabyte DSL connection[38].

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[35] Information gathered from comparing the prices of three main ISP providers in Syria that they published on their website.
[36] Arab Advisors Group, 'ADSL Rates in the Arab World: A Regional Comparison', December 2008
[37] Conversation carried out with Syrian blogger, Fadi, on March 2009 via instant messenger.
[38] Information from Broadband Lebanon website. A web site demanding affordable and reliable broadband in Lebanon. The Lebanese Broadband Stakeholders Group (LBSG) is a lose coalition of

While Internet users commonly complain about the slow Internet in their country, the practical implications of it on their browsing habits are unknown due to the little data available on what Arabs *do* when they are online after they gain access. Are those with a dial-up connection, for example, spending less time browsing because it costs more money than those on broadband paying a fixed fee for unlimited access? Does a slow connection stop users from watching videos and downloading and uploading photos on social networking sites? Evidence from fieldwork suggest that Lebanese and Syrian on social networking sites such as Facebook are using it just as others are in countries with more developed infrastructure. It just takes longer to browse. A discussion held with school students[39] revealed that those who miss episodes of their favorite dramas on television would download the episodes online even if they have to wait over an hour for the download to finish.

4.2 Internet cafes as alternative access points

4.2.1 The process of opening up an Internet café

Ethnographers on Internet use in developing contexts have stressed the importance of public places such as Internet cafes as an alternative means of accessing the web. Yet, for the café owner, the process of starting an Internet café seems to be a long and exhausting one in Syria. An Internet cafe owner still waiting to get approval from officials to open his café, spoke in an interview in March 2008 (see Appendix A), about the painstakingly long and risky process of starting an Internet café in Damascus. He stated that one couldn't apply for a full final approval until they have the cafe set up, computers installed and connected to the Internet. Only then they need to supply documents to five different ministries, the police and the neighbours to get approval.

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individuals, non- profit organizations, professional associations, and businesses with a viable interest in broadband and its related services
[http://www.broadbandlebanon.org/FAQ.aspx?pageid=84&PID=1]
[39] BBC research related activity on April 3, 2009. See Appendix A – interview log.

He continued that the ministries meet only twice a year to carry out these decisions allowing for the computers' value to have depreciated by the time one opens the cafe. He added that on top of this he has to bribe every ministry if he wants anything to move forward. He said:

> They make it complicated because they don't want anyone to have Internet, they don't want anyone to see anything or write anything. They don't want us to see the outside world…

A Damascus- based Internet café owner, Azzam, also told *Menassat* (Abdel-latif 2008), an online news service, that the government is well known for cutting service or restricting internet speeds to those café owners they 'don't like'. He added in the interview:

> [the government] reduced our capacity from 2 megabytes per second to one megabyte per second without any prior notice. And we did an informal poll in the area only to find out that this 'official' decision didn't include everyone, just some specific places...We incur a lot of economic losses because of our poor Internet performance. I mean the connection is very slow, and everything is monitored.

Samir (SB4), a blogger interviewed whose family owned an Internet café in Beirut near the Lebanese American University said that it was relatively easy to open a café in Lebanon but was very expensive. He said:

> It's expensive. What you would pay $10-15 for a certain amount of bandwidth in Europe, you would pay over $1000 for here. It's ridiculous but it's a government monopoly and they make most of their money from the field…from the phones…call charges are most expensive and so is Internet. As you can see this is the only money making industry for them. This is how they survive and run the country…

4.2.2 Café research – Users & Owners

This section summarises the findings of a small scale Internet café research conducted by the BBC WST (see Chapter 3.2.1) and managed by myself in May 2009. One researcher was hired in both Beirut and Damascus and given two questionnaires (one for owners and one for users) to fill out. In each café they were

asked to interview four customers and the café owner. They were also asked to spend time in the café and write down a description of it and any observations. I briefed both researchers personally and wrote the summary below stemming from the questionnaires filled out and the researchers observations. See Appendix J for the café owner and user questionnaire.

4.2.2.1 Description of Cafes researched in Beirut

The Internet café research in Beirut was carried out at four different locations within the centre and residential suburbs of Beirut. The first café researched was located in Hamra, renowned for its diverse sectarian mix as well as being both a residential and commercial area and home to two of the major and top international universities in Beirut. The café in Hamra was frequented by a large mix of those who either work in the area, go to one of the universities or live there – making it a very diverse atmosphere in terms of lifestyles, age and gender. According to the café worker 'at night most of my customers are boys who like to play and compete'. However during the day 'there is also an elderly clientele who come to communicate with children living abroad through Skype, MSN and hotmail'. Most of the customers during the day are either retired or university students, he added.

The second café, BIOS, was in Mar Elias - an old residential area, known for its mix of Sunnis and Shiites. It is an overcrowded middle class neighbourhood and has a stretch of commercial shops along its main street. Most of the cafes' clients are those residing in the neighbourhood, according to the owner. There is also an army base nearby and some soldiers sometimes come in to check their emails. The café offers laser printing, an ink jet plotter, a Xerox machine, scanner and 10 headsets. The Café owner stated that since the increase in Internet access at home, the café has to provide extra incentives for clients, such as laser printing, photocopying and a plotter printer for architecture students. The café owner also said that he attempts to make it a welcoming social environment where people can meet their friends. Customer Internet activities, according to the owner, range from chatting, emailing and calling friends/relatives abroad. He said university students come to carry out some research assignments for their courses.

Nabil net, the third café researched, is also a small shop that sells pirated DVD's. It is located in Sakyet Al Janzeer, a lower middle class neighbourhood, and caters mainly to the teenage boys of the neighbourhood. According the café owner, almost all the kids are from the neighbourhoods and are good friends of the owner. He even stated that some kids have accounts that the parents come and settle at the end of the month. The café is mostly used for games, it is very loud and the Internet speed offered is 256K. The owner said 'I don't need to provide a higher speed for the activities carried out here'. Only half the computers are only connected to the Internet and You-tube is not allowed because 'it would cost the owner too much if everyone watched videos'. The kids that come to the café are between 9-15. The owner said 'it is a place where kids can have some fun and play networked games after school'. While some of the customers interviewed had access and the games at home, they didn't like the fact that they had to share one computer with their siblings.

The last Internet café, Images, was located in the Monot area in Ashrafieh, an affluent upper middle class Christian neighbourhood in central Beirut. The area is also a commercial hub and very lively in the evenings with many restaurants and bars. The French Language University, USJ (Universite Saint Joseph) is located very close by. The cafes in the neighbourhood, according to the Beirut researcher, are frequented by students and are very quiet if not shut on the weekends. Images had two Macintosh computers, a Xerox machine, scanners, a fax machine and offered binding and laminating services. The owner said that most of his clients are 'university students in their 20's, male and female, and very modern'. He said most of his clients probably have Internet at home but come to the café because it is closer to their work or university. He said people also come for the faster Internet speed and the limitless downloads.

4.2.2.2 Research summary of Beirut's Cafes

The price of one hour of Internet use in the cafes ranged from 2000-3500 L.L. The average time spent in the café is usually 1-2 hours, however those frequenting the café at night stay up to three hours often socialising with friends and playing networked games. The online activities of those frequenting cafes ranged from browsing websites to finding information online, emailing, reading the news, chatting and calling people abroad. There was also heavy use of social networking

sites especially Facebook amongst the younger clientele. Only one person reported to using the Internet to meet new people, while others seemed to use existing social networks via Facebook, Bebo and other SNS sites - in contrast to Syrian café users.

Most of the cafes in Beirut were frequented by customers during the day for fast and instrumental reasons rather than a place to hang out in (with the exception of Nabil Net). The older clientele interviewed who went to the cafes during the day, mostly did not have Internet at home and used cafes to call, email and exchange photos with relatives abroad. They did not use the Internet for other purposes but those. As for the younger ones, some had ADSL access at home but used cafes, as they are closer to their work or university. Moreover in the cafes (in contrast to work or university), they can access sites such as Facebook or msn. All of those with access at home connected through broadband with speeds of average 128-256 kbps. No one reported to connecting via dial up and the cafes that had several computers connecting via dial up were never used.

Most of the obstacles regarding Internet use were connected to the low speed (especially at peak times) and the high subscription prices. Restrictions for those who have it at home and are young is that they often have to share it with siblings. Most people used the Internet in English.

4.2.2.3 Description of Cafes researched in Damascus

Four cafes were researched in Damascus. Roma Net, the first café researched, was on Baghdad Street, a middle class but dense neighbourhood with diverse residents in terms of religion, cultural backgrounds and lifestyle. The owner of the café stated that 75% of his customers are male, with the majority being working class and about 30% students. He also stated that people used to frequent cafes to download programs but the habits have recently changed and most people come to cafes to chat using MSN.

The second Internet café, Ashtar, was located in a working class and conservative neighbourhood called Harsata. Most of the customers are young and between the ages of 15-25, according to the Internet café owner. During the day, males and females frequent the café but during the night, the café owner stated that 'one hardly

finds a single female'. According to the café owner, most people in the café are either students or unemployed and they 'come for entertainment, to kill time and mostly chat online'. He said that hardly 'anyone comes to the café to carry out research or to read'.

The third café, Speed Net, is located in an upper class area called Al Qisaa. Most of its residents are Christian and more liberal than the average Syrian, according to the Damascus researcher. The owner of Speed Net stated that 'around 60%-70% of the people who come to the café 'are male and between the ages of 15-30'. He also said that they mostly use the Internet to chat and call friends/relatives abroad. He added, 'they come to the café to get out of their family's house, for the speed of the Internet (especially for video calling), and because the café offers a social setting and services such as coffees/teas'.

The last café, Al Jamiaa [the University], was located right by the University of Damascus and frequented mostly by university students during the day and people who live in the neighbourhood in the evening. The café owner said that many people come to the café in groups and talk about University online forums and other university related activities. He also stated that most of them use the Internet for chatting. There were more women than men during the day, as observed by the Damascus researcher.

4.2.2.4 Research summary for Damascus's Cafes

Cafe owners said they do not monitor their clients' activities. One said that 'would simply drive them away'. However, some of them made sure that their clients did not use proxies or view sites banned by the government. All of the cafes charged between 40 – 50 SY Liras / hour [£0.68] for using the Internet.

The clientele in each café was significantly diverse depending on the neighbourhood. In working class areas, most of the users were male and went to the cafes to chat and contribute to forums in the evenings, often spending several hours at a time, whereas in university or commercial neighbourhoods, there were an equal number of women to men and they visited cafes for research, emailing and chatting - mostly spending no longer than 1-2 hours at a time. In fact, a surprising high majority (everyone but

one customer surveyed) reported frequently contributing to forums and participating in virtual chat rooms. Most of the answers to the activities included 'chatting with friends and meeting new people via forums'. The Damascus researcher said that his observation of the cafés allowed him to see the extent of the use of the Internet for chatting and contributing to forums. He believes that the use is even higher than stated by those interviewed and most people in Internet cafes go solely for that purpose. The researcher added that most of the debates taking place on forums are superficial and contributors are mainly on them to meet others without fear of being watched or judged – especially between the opposite sexes. He attributes this trend to the general conservative attitudes in Syrian society that limits relations between women and men. Indeed, Syrian society is not set up to promote mingling and crossover between different societal layers and the virtual world is providing this for them. The Damascus researcher also observed that those using the cafes were not of the 'intellectual or cultured spectrum of society'. Most café users are there to spend spare time and chat rather than constructively use the Internet for research, he said.

In Damascus, almost all of users frequenting the cafes reported to having a dial-up connection at home. They used the cafes in order to get a higher speed connection (all cafe owners provide speeds of around 256kbps and some even said a 4 mega download). Most people said they come to Café even though they have access at home because of the speed it offers and/or family restrictions (getting away from the house / for privacy). Young adults in Syria and Lebanon typically do not leave the family home until they are married.

Some also visited Internet cafes to socialise with friends. Cafes were used more for social gatherings than in Beirut and almost all of them offered coffees, teas and other café services. Some of the cafes had tables for visitors to use without a computer. The sample was almost homogenous in terms of restrictions to using the Internet. Almost all of them cited speed as a major obstacle. Others complained about the blocking of sites such as Blogspot and YouTube. Many were also frustrated at the randomness of the blocking that takes place. They complained about sites relating to technology for example being blocked for no obvious reasons.

4.3 Inequalities relating to gender

While exact figures of female Internet users are not available, there are some indicators that show that women use the Internet less than men. A report (Harris interactive, 2009) on Jordan's Internet users concluded that females comprised only 35.6% of Internet users. The Syrian blog aggregator, Al Mudawen, gathers statistics on the blogs it aggregates. It indicates that in 2009 females wrote only 35 out of 257 blogs in Syria. Maya (SB1), a female Syrian blogger, explained in an interview in 2008 that 'there are few females in the Syrian blogopshere…the ones that do write, discuss issue of love and romance, I maybe one of the few female activists'.

Conservative gender roles are a significant barrier to accessing public access points in some areas in Arab countries. In certain areas, as café research indicates, Internet cafes are not welcoming for females. The Internet café owner Ashtar, located in a working class and conservative neighbourhood called Harsata stated on the questionnaire 'during the day, males and females frequent the café but during the night, one hardly finds a single female'. This is a significant hindrance considering the high costs associated with domestic Internet use. Moreover, some Internet cafes charge less for accessing the Internet at off-peak hours. According to Wheeler (2006), some Internet cafés in Jordan charge users only $1 for accessing the Internet for any duration at late hours (12.am to 7am). Access to an Internet café by women at this time is very unlikely.

A family (LF1) interviewed in the southern suburb of Beirut during fieldwork (see appendix A for interview log) said that they do not allow their female children to enter Internet cafés. They said "men go there 'to do bad things' such as chat in a dirty manner to women and look at porn. We do not want our female children to enter". Owing to the regimented patriarchal attitudes in many Arab countries, it is perceived that women will be more vulnerable to bad content on the Internet than men. Nassim (SB8), a Syrian blogger spoke in an interview about the relatively small number of female bloggers in Syria. He said 'It's because Syrians have this attitude that females should not go online and should not be seeing things'. However, these examples do not illustrate that women are not using the Internet but rather that they have more barriers to access than men do. In Egypt for example, while women make

up only 24% of the workforce according to a 2005 UN statistic, they make up an estimated 30% of Internet users (Otterman, 2007).

4.4 Language, education and values

The dominance of English-language material on the Internet is still a major factor in limiting the growth of the Internet in the Arab world. Initially, the source of the problem was technical, as the Internet did not support the language. While Arabic is one of the top six languages used in the United Nations and is the mother tongue of over 300 million people in 22 Arab countries, this is not reflected on the Internet. The Internet world is currently an English-centric one, with basic services such as e-mail address and domain names that still require a Latin character set (Sawahel, 2008). While, almost everyone with an education in Lebanon and Syria learns a second language in school (French and English being the most prevalent) and are thus able to read the Latin letters, many do not develop it enough to use it confidently (see Chapter 6.3.1)

Ahmad Hamzawi, Google's engineering manager in the Middle East and North Africa said "less than one percent of all the information on the Web is available in Arabic, while Arabic-language users of the Internet account for about 5 percent of people using the Web" (Mroue, 2009). The Internet café research conducted in Beirut and Damascus also revealed much of the hesitation regarding language. Many café users said they transliterated Arabic using the Latin alphabet and that their typing using the Arabic alphabet would be slow as they don't use it so much. The users who transliterated said that they used the Internet mostly to chat with family and friends.

Another compounding factor that has marginalised many Internet users is general low digital literacy. According to Dutta et al. (2003), ICT education has not been integrated into the curriculum in most of the Arab world – another key site for public access. Moreover teachers do not get the adequate training to confidently incorporate using the Internet for research in their teaching. The head teacher of a public school in the southern suburbs of Beirut (see Appendix A) said:

> Most of the staff here cannot use computers and while the
> government is slowly starting to incorporate it into the curriculum,
> many of the staff do not have the motivation to learn".

Young people in turn learn how to use the Internet from peers. Since it is absent in education, this has created the notion amongst many families that the Internet is wasteful for their children rather than seeing the Internet as potentially opening up a wealth of information. As the ISP manager (ISP1) said during an interview:

> People are afraid of the Internet. People are afraid of the Internet for
> their children. They think there is bad content, that it is wasteful, that
> they will spend all their time on it chatting.

The Internet is generally seen as source of entertainment rather than a space where one's opportunities can be developed. The case is even more extreme in Syria. Bloggers interviewed who were attending university have pointed out that the Internet is not part of learning programs (SB7, SB5). While there have been development programs run by government and development agencies that aim to introduce Internet access to rural areas, they are mostly failing. The national project director for the Strategic ICT Programme for Social and Economic Development (a joint UNDP and government project), explained in an interview that:

> Internet does not flow like water in Syria, the development projects
> that are bringing Internet access to remote areas in Syria are bringing
> in an alien technology and throwing it on a community, there has to be
> a wider investment in it and a regulatory framework, this in turn will
> create demand. For the time being, Internet is seen here as a luxury
> and waste of time rather than a necessity.

The Internet is an important point of discussion and topic with most young people in urban settings. There is also a lot of negativity concerning what it is used for and the values surrounding it. This is exacerbated by the fact that many people use computers and the Internet in visible settings such as Internet cafes to play networked games. A family interviewed (LF2) in Lebanon places restrictions on its children's internet usage allowing them only to spend an hour per day . Many young people interviewed during the Internet café research quoted that their families were a major restriction on their Internet use. Souraya (SB7), an 18-year-old journalism

student and blogger said in an interview that when she goes to her friends' houses, she would never mention that she is a 'blogger'. She explained 'either they would not have heard of it and if they had, they would think it is a bad thing to do for a young girl like me'. Indeed there is a considerable age gap amongst Internet users.

Moreover, the Internet was introduced to the public in Syria in 2000 when Bashar al-Assad became President, making it the last Arab country to do so. Experimental connections however had began as early as 1997 with 150 subscribers from state institutions and ministries given access through the Public Telecommunication Corporation. Others were promised access six months after the start of the experimental project. The Public Telecommunication Corporation along with the Syrian Scientific Society subsequently worked out draft regulations for Information Services, and priorities regarding which agencies should be connected were to be set by the prime minister. One year later, however, most private Internet users in Syria were still gaining access through service providers in Lebanon and government-run newspapers were still waiting to be connected[40] (Article 19, 1998: p33). This late introduction was justified under the banner "security". It is also worth noting that fax machines were prohibited in Syria until 1993. The project director for the Strategic ICT Programme for Social and Economic Development noted "Internet was introduced to the public in a very unnatural way – hidden away before that in government circles".

Indeed, low cost does not mean that people will start buying computers and an Internet connection. Many cannot envision how a computer would fit into their daily lives. In Syria and Lebanon, valued services such as online banking, e-commerce and interactive websites for companies and public institutions are not generally available and thus the Internet is not necessarily seen as advancing or making life more efficient – but a 'luxury' and for entertainment. This was pointed out by the marketing and research manager of Aloola (ISP3) in Syria. He said that the low integration rate in Syria was due to:

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[40] Article 19 (1998) Walls of Silence: Media and Censorship in Syria, London: Article 19

> [The internet] is not essential. It's more of a luxury. It is not a
> necessity. I can live my life normally without it. There are no
> essential services offered online like there are in the West.

4.5 Censorship

4.5.1 Random blocking in Syria

In addition to some of the economic and cultural variables affecting Internet use, political barriers also exist. Syria, in fact, has been under emergency law since 1963, justified by the state of war which continues to exist with Israel and by continuing threats posed by different groups. Under emergency law, the Syrian government has the right to detain anyone that is considered a threat to public security. The Syrian government, which has a history of media ownership and control, has dealt with the Internet in ambiguous terms. It has initiated a number of projects such as granting remote areas access to the Internet and subsidizing the cost of personal computers, yet it is among the most repressive countries in the world with regard to freedom of expression and information[41]. While Bashar al-Assad had stated in his inaugural speech in 2000 that the introduction of the Internet to the public is for 'contemporary and progressive' society, many find that the internet will be used as another tool to monitor and detain those opposing the government.

According to the Open net Initiative website[42], countries like Syria focus their filtering efforts primarily on political content in contrast to Saudi Arabia that focuses on religious and social content. This can range from blocking sites that are critical of governments, leaders, ruling families and opposition websites as well as human rights and social communication sites. Regional and internal political conflicts are also behind content blocking. For example, Syria blocks all websites within the Israeli domain. There are many reports on the Open Net initiative Network, Human Rights Watch and Reporters without Borders that regularly list the sites that are blocked by the Syrian government.

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41 See Open Net Initiative and Reporters without Borders.
42 Information from Open Net Initiative [http://opennet.net/]

Much of the censorship is random and haphazard. The government has control over data communications within the country as well as coming into and leaving the country via its control of the international gateway and the public data network (Zarwan, 2005). The ISPs whether state owned or not, block the sites that the authorities tell them to in a list they receive that is regularly updated (ISP3). No public declarations or justifications are made when a new site is blocked.

For example, the authorities blocked access to social networking service Facebook on Syria's Internet servers on 19 November 2007 without giving any explanation. In March 2008 it blocked Maktoob.com, one of the largest email and blog portals in the Arab world. This stopped Syrians from having access to over 3,000 Arab blogs. Other social networking sites such as Wikipedia, Blogspot and YouTube are also blocked.

Most Syrian bloggers are now on WordPress, another blog hosting portal. The first ever WordPress blog was blocked on January 13, 2009 according to Lebanese online news service Mennasat. The blog belonged to Syrian human rights activist and blogger Akram (SB10) who currently resides in Beirut. Akram's father is also in exile for his political opposing views. The government has detained people for expressing their opinions or reporting information online, and even for forwarding political jokes by email. Seven students were reported by Amnesty as being detained on June 2007 after calling for peaceful political reforms online[43]. Tarek Bayassi, aged 24 was also jailed for three years for publishing "false news" on the Internet after being detained without trial for almost a year (ibid). His father was a political activist and Standish (2008) states in that the security services therefore wanted to nip any political inclination he had in the bud[44]. She (2008: 74-75) had content analysed blog posts of Syrians for her dissertation and concluded that she found at least three incidents of bloggers that were much harsher than Bayassi in their criticism online, yet they were never detained. As such, it appears that all those detained had already been under the government radar offline.

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[43] http://www.amnesty.org.uk/news_details.asp?NewsID=17391
[44] Standish (2008) wrote this information to me in an email on February 26th, 2010

The government has also made an attempt to restrict the use of anonymous identities which many bloggers use to circumvent restrictions. Al Safir newspaper (Ibrahim, 2007) and the Malaysia Sun both reported on the Syrian Ministry of Communication and Technology's measures to restrict the use of anonymous comments. In a decree it issued on July 25th, 2007, the government required all website owners

> To display the name and e-mail of the writer of any article or comment [appearing on their site] ... clearly and in detail, under threat of warning the owner of the website, then restricting access to the website temporarily and in case the violation is repeated, permanently banning the website (Ibrahim, 2007).

The country also began to ask Internet café owners as of 2007 to write down the number on the identity cards of those visiting. All users have to show these upon entering the café and it is recorded in a logbook. Yet all those with broadband access can visit any website they please. While the main supplier for broadband is the government and it has leased a very limited number of broadband lines, there are some contractual disagreements with the company that executed the ADSL project and PDN (government data provider). PDN claims that technical support and training is included in the contract while the company that executed claims it is not. Therefore the government is not trained to control ADSL, which has resulted in technical teams using trial and error for their banning of sites. Therefore most ADSL users can access any site that is banned in Syria (information from ISP3).

4.5.2 Users' counter measures

The impact of a direct form of censorship is ambiguous. The government cannot monitor all sites on the Internet and computer users often use many counter measures to view blocked sites such as proxies to access blocked websites. Proxies allow users to access any blocked website and are widely available on the Internet. In fact, many initiatives can be found on the Internet that give advice to users on how to be anonymous and get past filtering and blocking. According to the café research conducted, some Internet café owners may overlook the use of proxies in their Internet cafes, yet others may not allow it

Moreover, websites that discuss sensitive issues have a yahoo mailing list in case the site is blocked as part of their contingency plan. Once the websites are blocked by ISPs, users continue to exchange content via e-mail. Because it is very difficult for ISPs to filter e-mail discussions, group conversation continues to be virtually uncensored. According to the Alexa website, which tracks the most frequently visited sites by country, several banned sites such as Facebook, Blogger, YouTube and the blogs on Maktoob – still get the highest traffic in Syria[45].

As one blogger, Freeman (SB2), reiterated 'we never know what these red lines are, I don't feel 100% safe'. Another blogger, Maya (SB1) said 'I feel safer when I blog in English…I feel like they wont read it. People always tell me to be careful and that they [the intelligence] know everything". Sarah Standish after having submitted her BA thesis (2008) on bloggers' freedom of expression in Syria told me in an email on February 26 2010 that she thinks that one of the major factors affecting the expansion of blogging in Syria is not censorship as it stands but the internet's relative marginalisation. She wrote in the email:

> Upon reflection, and after living in Syria, I do not think the majority of people are not seriously bothered by the fact that the government blocks so many sites because the bans are so easy to get around. Anecdotally, the vast majority of people I met, including well-educated and computer-literate people, had never even heard of the term "blog"'.

Similarly, the research and marketing manager of Aloola in Syria (ISP3) said that:

> People in Syria love to say that everything on the Internet is banned but this is really not the main obstacle to using the Internet. The real obstacle is the infrastructure, which makes it slow and expensive.

4.5.3 Tacit and extrajudicial censorship and self-censorship

The direct application of censorship may not hinder people's access to content as the authorities will not be able to track down every single anonymous comment and/or every objectionable website. Nevertheless, what are the consequences of this kind

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[45] www.alexa.com

of ambiguous surveillance and monitoring of Internet activity, whether accurate or not? Does this policing state lead to an internalization of these forms of structures and thus self- censorship? Are these practices and the authoritarian regime leading to a regulating and unconscious normalisation of the hegemonic practices? Does Agre's (2002) normalisation of 'authoritarian runs deep' within the people work in this context.

Lisa Wedeen (1998, 1998) in her work on the Cult of Asad, argues that authoritarianism in Syria is not a form of symbolic domination that has a hegemonic legitimacy and produces a sense of unconscious compliance, as Foucault (1997) would suggest. In contrast, she argues that in Syria, citizens are completely aware of the politics of dissimulation that occurs (1998: 519) and know that their obedience is a charade but are required to act *as if* they believed in it. She continues that they still conform to it through sceptical ambivalence because the system that Assad has put in place is coercing. She adds:

> The focus of coercive compliance is not the actual meting out of punishments to those who disobey but the dissemination of credible threats of punishment. Although threats, to be credible, must at least occasionally be carried out, in general they suffice to ensure the compliance of most citizens

There is not an absolute internalization of ruling ideas but a more pragmatic or sceptical acceptance (Zizek, 1989: 268). While many bloggers may want to explicitly criticize government policy, yet in general, unless they are already inclined to resist such as the 'opposition', they do not. They do not out of fear and the repercussions of their actions but also because 'culture' structures them not to resist. Swidler (1986) argues that what people want is "of little help in explaining their actions". She says, "people may share common aspirations, while remaining profoundly different in the way their culture organises their overall patterns of behaviour" (Swidler, 1986: 175). In this case, unless there is an already existing drive for emancipation, the Internet is unlikely to create one. Yet it may facilitate it.

Standish (2008:71) said of her content analysis of Syrian blogs in 2007 that there are very few Syrian bloggers who wrote about political issues on their blogs. She remains unsure, however, if the silence on such issues is out of fear or indifference

(ibid: 84). This was also found in the conclusions of my MA (Taki, 2005) whereby very few bloggers stated that they wrote about political issues. Thus the Internet will not suddenly bring about the changes that many predicted it would. Just because the technology may supply channels of resistance and disobedience, it doesn't mean that it will happen. The cult of Asad and its coercive system is one structuring element to their activities (see Chapter 6.3.2 on anonymity).

Those living in countries with controlled media are more likely to be afraid of the written word and are less likely to blog about politically and socially sensitive issues than those who have 'free media' systems. The direct application of censorship may not necessarily affect the average user directly. That is, the Syrian government will not be able to track down every single anonymous comment or website. Nevertheless, the perception, whether accurate or not, that the government or society as a whole is engaged in the surveillance and monitoring of Internet activity, can lead to an internalization of censorship structures and thus self- censorship. Research (Taki, 2005) conducted in 2005 on bloggers in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, revealed that 80% of the 91 bloggers who responded to the survey stated that they practice self- censorship. Self-censorship does not have to be a result of a coercive government. In my survey conducted in 2008, many reported self-censoring for other reasons including; fear of political parties[46] or social pressure because they got to know those reading them.

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[46] Two respondents to the survey said that they are anonymous online because of fear from opposing political parties in Lebanon rather than government oppression. See Chapter 6.3.2

4.6 Conclusion

There are several variables emerging from the data that have a correlation with how actors in Lebanon and Syria may (or may not) use the Internet. There is evidence to suggest that economic decisions to invest in network infrastructure are a major factor in Internet diffusion if one looks at cross-national integration. Indeed, in Lebanon and Syria, centralised control over Internet operation and the monopolistic structure of the Internet economy, have allowed for a slow and expensive Internet especially when compared to developed countries. Unfair competition among ISPs and higher rates of Internet charges will result in fewer households online.

A slow and expensive Internet will definitely hinder people from gaining *effective* access to the Internet. Yet there have been a number of strategies that users have sought out to overcome some of these impediments. The emergence of alternative access points such as Internet cafes are one example. Black-market ISPs providing pirate Internet at lower costs operate extensively in Lebanon. There are also strategies that users employ to overcome the bandwidth problem. Many ISPs in Lebanon offer unlimited downloading after midnight, and users of Internet cafes have reported to waiting till then to watch their favourite series. In Syria, many have reported hardly watching videos because their connection is slow unless they have a strong motivation to watch it. So while a slow and expensive Internet is a hampering variable to Internet use, there are many strategies of action that people may choose to overcome them if they are inclined to.

However, while costs and speed have a strong and obvious correlation with Internet diffusion, it is not to be the only measure of inequality. There are still inequalities that exist with or without the emergence of the Internet and that translate online. These impediments or structures in turn may affect whether people have the resources or cultural 'skill set' to use the technology. Some studies have shown the correlation between social capital and Internet use. A few researchers have examined self-reports of skill, and found that users with less formal education are less confident in their abilities (Bonfadelli 2002). Evidence from café research in Lebanon and Syria and conversations with families and pupils at school also indicate that those further down the ladder reported to using the internet for playful or

entertainment objectives whereas those higher up the ladder saw it as tool for perceived benefits and to improve one's chances. These are all related to the educational curriculum in different schools and the incorporation of the Internet in the curriculum. Those who are in private schooling and thus have stronger foreign language skills (see Chapter 6. 3.1) will have access to a wider selection of sources on the Internet.

Gender inequalities can also act as an obstacle to access. Bloggers and families spoken to believe that the general attitudes regard the Internet as containing harmful content that women will be more vulnerable to. Age also is a factor. People have to find the internet as a welcome and unthreatening space to be able to utilise it well and the elderly, not accustomed to it, will have a harder time learning the 'skill set' to use it.

Yet this does not mean that the Internet has not presented the Syrian and Lebanese public with new opportunities and that access and use will increase. It does mean, however, that social inequalities will not erode suddenly. Many in Syria for example use the Internet to cross over the many restrictions imposed on them socially. Since there is not much public gathering for men and women, forums have provided a counter public for them to socialise in. Bloggers use it as a tool to express their ideas and thoughts yet those using it are already inclined to express themselves and blogging or forums are mere tool that satisfies this existing need. Therefore it is important to question how people conceive the technology - their knowledge of it, their attitude toward it. Only in this light, one may be able to find how people will adjust to the cultural variables surrounding them.

Chapter V. Historical Specificities of Lebanese and Syrian Blogging

Chapter 4 looked at the infrastructural variables affecting the use of the Internet in Lebanon and Syria, such as the role of government policy, inequalities relating to gender, literacy rates and censorship. These variables are important because they have an effect on who appropriates the Internet and how. However, it is also important to understand the specific social and historical conditions in which blogging emerged. This chapter will map out the history of blogging, how it formed and developed, key events that impacted upon it and discourses about it. Discourse in this context refers to the specific ways of referring to blogging that have acquired a habitual or taken-for-granted character (Crossley 2005: 61). These discursive practices generate certain meanings associated with blogs, and hierarchies with regard to content and style - such as the different and shifting standards that come to form the "right kind of blogging practices" for instance. The emergence of blogging in Lebanon and Syria will be discussed in light of not only what has been written about bloggers and blogs, but also what bloggers have said about their activities in interviews.

5.1 Blogging through Time: An Evolving Practice

Before the introduction of blog hosting tools in 1999, weblogs required some level of computer coding skills. According to Blood (2002) the first people who were blogging were web designers, software designers, and computer scientists. Blood, one of the first bloggers and authors to write a history of blogging in her two books *We've Got Blog: How Weblogs are Changing our Culture* (2002) and *Weblogs, a History and Perspective* (2006) remarked in a newspaper interview in 2001 shortly before her first book was published (Rodgers, 2001) that:

> [Before blog hosting tools were available] we thought that there would be maybe 100 of us in the end, and that bloggers would be in high demand. We didn't foresee the introduction of tools that would enable anyone to start a weblog. And we certainly never thought half a million people would be interested in blogging

The first bloggers' activities were primarily based on links to web sites and news sources they deemed interesting. Their sites were called filters at the time and were seen as maps and networks of the Internet. They guided viewers to other pages and are considered as the predecessors for search engines and bookmarks[47] (Carl, 2003). Through these links to they began to form niche networks and sub-communities. John Barger, a programmer, coined the name 'weblog' in December 1997, as a combination of 'web' and 'log' to describe the process of 'logging the web' on his site 'Robot Wisdom'[48], an influential early blog. The term is now commonly abbreviated to blog. Barger's site is a list of links he found useful and wanted to share with others, but as with most of those blogging at the time, it contained virtually no commentary. According to Jill Walker Rettberg (2008: 24), this was the typical style of blogging at the time. She verifies her argument by giving the example of David Winer's blog 'Scripting News', launched in April 1997, which was the most widely read site at the time and literally consisted of a list of links to websites that he liked with little commentary.

According to Blood (2002: 7), the community of bloggers began to emerge when Jesse James Garrett, editor of Infosift, sent a list of sites in 1999 that he had been compiling since 1997 to Cameron Barrett, who had created popular site Camworld[49], thus adding to Barett's list of only 23 links. Other Internet users soon began to follow suit and launched similar sites. This, according to Blood (ibid), was the beginning of a rising community. Barrett's list grew too large, and by late 1999 he began to limit his site to include only weblogs he actually followed himself. Reading every weblog on a daily basis became an exceedingly difficult task, and keeping track of the new ones that were appearing was impossible. At that point, definitions of what constitutes a weblog were beginning to take a solid shape. This is exemplified in Cameron Barrett's post in 1999 questioning if his site should be termed a weblog. He said[50]:

> It must be a blog because it's got all of the aspects commonly
> associated with weblogs. It's updated regularly [daily]. It's got a nice,
> clean easy-to-use design and user interface. It doesn't patronize the
> end user, dumbing things down too much. It has a theme [Random

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[47] The first search engines went live in 1993 (http://www.searchenginehistory.com/) Bookmarks were also incorporated into browsers in 1993.
[48] Robot wisdom blog http://www.robotwisdom.com.
[49] http://camworld.org/archives/001177.html.
[50] http://camworld.org/archives/001177.html.

Thoughts + Web Design + New Media]. It has a way for the users to interact with each other [a mailing list]. It even has somewhat of a community, maintained by repeat visitors and list members who contribute many of the links often found in Camworld.

In 1999, Pyra Labs introduced a user-friendly and free software called Blogger. Although Pitas.com by Andrew Smales was the first tool to be introduced a few months before Pyra labs in July 1999, Blogger rapidly became popular. The blog hosting site made it very easy to set up a weblog without downloading software, buying a domain name or having any knowledge of HTML. The software had a built-in design allowing bloggers to edit text in reverse chronological order as well as embed URLs that direct readers to other sites of interest. Almost immediately, other weblog content management tools like LiveJournal, UserLand, and Movable Type opened. These software packages are largely credited with enlarging the blogging community by significantly lowering the barriers to entry.

Blood (2000) believes that the shift from filter-style blogs to journal-style blogs is primarily due to the introduction of the free-form interface of the software tools. She (2002: 12) states that due to these shifts, the definition of blogs changed from 'a list of links with commentary and personal asides' to 'a website that is updated frequently,x with new material posted at the top of the page'. However, Rettberg (2008: 24) in her book *Blogging* cites blog authors, such as Justin Hall, who had been blogging before the convenience of blog hosting tools were readily available and whose style is similar to how people blog today. Justin's 'Links from the Underground'[51] site was initiated in 1994 while he was in his first year of university. Under the 'vita'[52] section of his site, which told the story of his life, the text contained many links to the different stories with the blog that would keep leading the reader through different phases of his life. In 1996, he also opened a section in which he began publishing diary-like entries called 'daze'[53]. It was organised in months and included long passages of text and used links to build an argument within the context of the text. Justin was also accompanied by other text-based blogs during that period. Notable personalities who emerged in the blogosphere with

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[51] http://www.links.net/
[52] http://www.links.net/vita
53 http://www.links.net/daze/

postings of diary-like entries were Carolyn Burkes and Willa[54], who were both writing in 1995. Indeed, between 1994 and 1997, there were 30 known web journals that are today compiled in a list on Carolyn Burke's blog[55].

By early 2000, there were more prevalent understandings of the meaning and practices associated with blogs, constructed by those who first began to blog. The early blogger, David Winer (2003) of Scripting News, wrote an article in 2003 titled "What makes a weblog a weblog". He says, " I want to list all the known features of weblog software, but more important, get to the heart of what a weblog is[56]". He states that primarily a weblog is the "the unedited voice of a person" and it differs from wikis because they represent an interesting amalgam of many voices. Weblogs on the other hand, he says, 'are the unedited voice of a single person…on my weblog no one can change what I wrote". He then lists the technical features of blogs such as posts, links, permalinks, archives etc.

Between 2003 and 2005 several books on blogging were published, mostly written by practitioners. These books focused on the technology of blogging and guided readers on how to open and maintain a blog. The writings largely made assumptions about the 'effects' of blogging, based on the technological potential of the medium (Blood 2002, Bausch et al. 2002, Hewitt 2005, Gillmor 2000, Drezner & Farell 2004a, 2004b). Blogging was, and still is, frequently compared and contrasted to other forms of media by the authors of these early books (Gillmor 2004, Raynsford, 2003).

Similar definitions were used by blog hosting sites that were consistently relying on the recognition of the term weblog and implicitly connecting it with other known media forms. These included publications, journals and diaries, and logs of one's actions (Boyd, 2006: 4). When blogger.com was launched in October 1999, it described its product as "an automated weblog publishing tool", assuming that users had pre-existing knowledge of weblogs. Six months later the tagline "push button publishing" was added and the description of the tool was reiterated to mention "Blogger offers you instant communication power by letting you post your thoughts to the web whenever the urge strikes" (ibid). In academia, weblogs were described as

54 http://www.willa.com/journal/1995/aug95.htm
55 On diaryhistoryproject.com a list of the first web journals between 1994-1997 can be found.
56 http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/whatmakesaweblogaweblog.html

websites that are updated frequently with archived posts, displayed in reverse chronological order (Blood, 2002; Herring, Scheidt, et al., 2004; Trammell & Gasser, 2004; Walker, 2003, Nardi et al, 2004).

Andrew Smales, the founder of Pitas.com believes that the technology behind blog hosting sites was not new or complicated. They were merely created because of the rise in number of those who were already blogging and those reading blogs that someone was bound to find an easy way to do it (cited in Jensen, 2003). Meanwhile, Glenn Reynold, a professor at the University of Tennessee who began his popular blog, Instapundit[57], in 2001, argues that the events of September 11th had a huge impact on the popularity of blogging because people were dissatisfied with how the mainstream media were covering the event so they went to blogs where they could find relevant information, links and could join in the discussion (Carl, 2003). Indeed, around 2001, an increasing number of specialists, academics, journalists and politicians began to blog, which gave blogs more credibility in the media scene. In the United States, blogs were being posted by politicians such as Howard Dean[58] and Wesley Clark[59], as a means of getting closer to constituents. Similarly in the UK, Tom Watson[60], a Labour party MP, began a blog in 2003. They used blogs to communicate with their constituents in a more relaxed, informal and above all personal style that was seen as less bureaucratic than their press office. The academic community also took up blogging, with numerous professors and students writing about their intellectual as well as their personal lives. The most popular academic bloggers were Daniel Drezner, who was at the time at the University of Chicago, Jay Rosen from NYU and Noam Chomsky who began his blog "Turning the Tide"[61] in March 2004, placing heavy emphasis on Middle Eastern and US foreign policy (Parfect, 2004).

The first blog-driven story to receive attention in the media surfaced in late 2002 when bloggers disseminated a video of former U.S senate majority leader Trent Lott making racist remarks at a party honoring U.S Senator Storm Thurmond. While the mainstream media did not cover the subject widely, the people in the blogosphere

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[57] http://pajamasmedia.com/instapundit/
[58] http://www.democracyforamerica.com/
[59] http://securingamerica.com/ccn/blog/32
[60] http://www.tom-watson.co.uk/
[61] http://blogs.zmag.org/blog/13

dug a little deeper and found that Lott had been sympathetic to white supremacists in his early career. They collaboratively found evidence from his previous speeches that were racist, demonstrating that his remarks were not an isolated misstatement. The scandal led to Lott's resignation (Smolkin, 2004). Similarly in 2004, four reporters from the U.S news network CBS lost their jobs in what was called the Dan Rathergate scandal: bloggers exposed documents produced by Dan Rathergate on his show *60 Minutes* that seemed to prove that George W Bush failed to report for duty in the Texas Air National Guard and received preferential treatment as forgeries (Eberhart, 2005).

In 2004 many top A-list blogs were in some instances receiving over 75,000 unique visitors per day[62]. A search engine solely dedicated to blogs, Technorati.com was also launched in that year. Miriam Webster announced that the word 'blog' was statistically the most searched word on the Internet in that year and blogs were becoming better known amongst Internet users as American online dictionary, Miriam Webster, announced that 'blog' was the most looked-up word in that year. Journalists and political consultants began to monitor political blogs as a guide to what is going on in the rest of the Internet (Cornfields et al, 2004:5).

5.1.1 Framing of blogs

The general rhetoric surrounding blogs in the West at that point was split between utopian and dystopian claims concerning their influence. Most of these accounts were technologically deterministic; with technology seemingly having, either negative or positive, but profound effects on many aspects of humanity - communities, relationships, culture and authenticity, privacy, safety and identity (Baym, 2009). An analysis of the history of technology shows that such varied radical responses to new technologies is common (Winston, 1998).

The discussion on blogging in the media was primarily focused on its relation to politics and the mainstream media. It was debated whether weblogs had the potential to be an alternative to the mass media framed as amateur journalism,

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[62] http://truthlaidbear.com/

citizen journalism (e.g Glaser, 2004) or whether blogs could perform a gate keeping role for the media (e.g Drezner & Farell, 2004b, Gillmor, 2004, Hewitt, 2005). The mainstream media coverage of blogs was focused primarily on these A-list, established, well-known and/or controversial bloggers.

Similarly in academia, the weblog was evaluated relative to an idealized model of the Habermasian public sphere (Agre, 2002:313) and questions were raised on whether on-line political discussion is deliberative (Wilhelm, 2000, Seib, 2006). Blogs were often framed within the repertoire of computer mediated communication as highly interactive. The features that allowed interactivity were links to other blogs and sites of interest and a commenting system for those reading the blog. However, while links were seen as the most important feature of weblogs, their importance today is debatable in the face of more textual forms of blogging with few links[63].

Whilst the journalistic or political type of blogging received great interest and was viewed as having primarily 'good' effects on society, personal or diary type blogs were dismissed as just a new venue for an ever more de-politicised public or a form of self-indulgence. Articles about personal weblogging in the mainstream media in the UK, for example - according to Brake's study (2009: 133) - ranged between prurient interest in the more sensational blogs, such as the diary style blog of UK-based prostitute 'Belle De Jour', or puzzlement about such bloggers' motivations, and derision of those wanting to share intimate details of their lives with the world. These rapid responses to technology were based on the medium and its potential rather than on an understanding of why people are using them and the processes (see Chapter 2.3.4).

Herring et al (2004), who content-analysed press articles in a study in 2003, found that the media focused on the filter type blog; a blog categorised as linking extensively to other sites that are external to the blogger's inner world (world events, online happenings) and that are mostly written by male adults. The reason for this focus, they argue, is because their content is considered 'hard news' and thus has

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[63] See Chapter 7 that discusses how bloggers interact with their audiences and other bloggers.

wider democratic potential than the content of blogs focused on topics that concern the 'inner world' of bloggers such as human interest stories or 'soft news'. Wynn & Katz (1997: 297) also argue that the reason why the discursive focus on blogs is what it is today is because technological determinism which appeals to journalism "makes the genre of literature on cyberspace postmodern, visible and possibly influential".

5.2 Blogging in the Middle East: Who and When?

In March 2003, an Iraqi calling himself Salam Pax[64] was the first non-Western blogger to gain significant international press attention. His blog 'Where is Raed?' was an English language blog initially intended as letters to a friend in Jordan describing what it was like under the regime of Saddam Hussein at the time. Salam Pax has since become one of the most famous bloggers in the world. In 2003, he published a book of his blog posts and now writes regularly for *the Guardian* daily newspaper in the U.K (e.g Pax, 2003).

Similarly, Hossein Derkhshan, an Iranian blogger calling himself 'Hodder' who moved to Canada in 2000, published a guide to blogging in Persian in 2001 using Blogger's free service. At the time, blogger.com and most other blog hosting sites were not supporting either Persian or Arabic. So Derakhshan's guide was to give bloggers in Iran wanting to publish in Persian a way to do so using free blog hosting sites using Unicode[65]. He has been nicknamed the 'Iranian blog father'. Both Salam Pax and Derkhshan wrote and spoke in perfect English and were very critical of the authorities in their own countries. They were also both secular and liberal.

At that point, most blogs in the Middle East were being written in English by expatriates. Maktoob, an Arab Internet services company founded in Jordan in 1998, became the first Arabic/English email service provider to launch a blog hosting site, in 2005. Yet most popular blog hosting tools (such as blogspot and Wordpress) did not support the Arabic language until 2006. At that point bloggers could write their

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[64] Baghdad Burning also received significant coverage in the press around the same time. She wrote a blog http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com/ describing in English what it was like to live in war-torn Iraq. She has since had two books published *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq* (2005) and *Baghdad Burning II: Girl Blog from Iraq (2006).*

[65] Unicode is a series of character encoding standards intended to support the characters used by a large number of the world's languages - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unicode.

posts or blog entries in Arabic but the site interface was still in English. It was not until the end of 2007 that these sites had administration user interface support. Technically, anyone unable to speak any English would not have been able to create a blog using standard blogging software before 2007.

The media coverage of bloggers in the Middle East was highly optimistic, being based on the cases of a few select bloggers who have managed to break taboos or challenge authorities. It focused primarily on the type of bloggers which the Western media generally reaches out to; young, active, secular and opposing the authoritarian states of the Arab world. These bloggers fit well with the general expectations surrounding the use of the Internet for democratization and transformation in the Middle East. Human rights organizations also covered the censorship of blogs and imprisonment of bloggers and the media often picked up on them. Yet the coverage was mostly focused on a narrow band of political activism; the pro-democracy, liberal/secular bloggers and with rare exceptions did not include all those in opposition to the government or all those who challenged authorities (e.g, Lustig 2007, Pavel 2009, Mukaled 2009, Osman 2008) such as the Muslim Brotherhood bloggers for example. Typical of the coverage of Arab blogs is an excerpt from BBC article on 12 December 2007 titled "New Media Dodge Mid-east Censors". In the article, Lustig (2007) states:

> In the Arab world, in general, the media have been heavily politicised and governments have tended to control the main media outlets…But then, one day, along came the Internet. And it was as if someone had blown open a few million doors.

The next part of the story is dedicated to "Egyptian success". Academic articles on weblogs began to emerge around 2006. Some focused on Arab bloggers in general (Lynch 2007, Ulrich 2009, Seib 2006), many focused on Egypt's bloggers and the activities of the Kefaya movement (Otterman 2007, Isherwood 2008, Malky 2007, Radsch 2008, Shorbagy 2007) and a few on Lebanon's blogosphere during the 2006 war (Ward, 2007; Haugbolle, 2007). With the exception of Lynch (2007) who attempted to create a typology of the Arab blogosphere, the above literature focused on the achievements of a select number of bloggers, censorship of blogs, or the mobilization of bloggers during specific events.

In June 2009, the Berkman Centre for Internet and Society (Etling et al, 2009) published research on the Arab blogosphere. Its research, while exploratory in its coding of 4,370 Arab blogs, was based on previous articles that were written on Arab blogging (Lynch 2007, Isherwood 2008, Ajemian 2008, Zuckerman 2008). The centre states that it 'staked out important priorities for research' and these were based around the blog's role in political mobilization, its role in organizing meaningful pan-Arab communities, the implication of the Internet for Islamist movements and whether bloggers build bridges between West and East or serve domestic audiences.

5.2.1 The case of Egypt

While there were small communities of bloggers appearing in all the Arab countries, Egypt's blogosphere is regarded as the most influential and established blogosphere in the Arab world. In December 2004, the Kifaya movement (Arabic for 'enough') was established. Its use of the Internet in Egypt had a significant effect on the exposure of the Arab world to blogging and how it came to be understood. Malky (2007: 4) notes that whereas Kifaya provided the political space for voices of opposition to speak out, blogs provided the vehicle for Kifaya's mobilization. Kifaya and the early bloggers associated with it had a huge impact on the framing of blogging in the Middle East. Even today, in conversation, people associate blogging with Egypt and the Kifaya movement.

Kifaya consisted of Egyptian activists and intellectuals, united by their opposition to President Hosni Mubarak in a group that cut across ideological lines (Shorbagy 2007). Kifaya's manifesto called for civil disobedience while seeking to establish the right to demonstrate and talk about taboo issues openly (Radsch 2008:2). Throughout 2005, the movement held demonstrations and succeeded in attracting national and international attention, largely because of its online coverage. It is around this time that characters such as Wael Abbas, of the ' Egyptian Awareness' blog[66], emerged alongside many other prominent bloggers. They would post pictures and videos of political protests that the conventional newspapers would tend to censor. Collectively, the new Egyptian blogosphere covered Kifaya's actions when the

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[66] http://misrdigital.blogspirit.com

traditional newspapers did not for fear of being implicated with the illegality of such protests[67]. An underground network began to emerge as many of the bloggers, who numbered around 300-400 at the time, developed relationships with each other through meetings held offline, as well as rallies and protests.

Several controversial events that took place during the 2005 Egyptian presidential candidate campaign are seen as landmarks in the evolution of blogging within the region. These events invited prominent coverage in the international media through the combined efforts of Egyptian pro-democracy reform bloggers. These included the unravelling of a sexual harassment incident in downtown Cairo and an attack on an innocent man which highlighted other Egyptian police brutality. Attacks on women in Downtown Cairo erupted during the celebration of Eid Al Fitr, the last day of Ramadan, on October 24th 2006, when large groups of men attacked several women in the street. While this occurrence was not a unique case, it was the first time attacks were conducted on such a large scale. Much of Egypt's official and semi-official media obscured the reality of the situation by giving virtually no coverage of the event during the days that followed. Several bloggers who were present at the scene that day managed to video capture the event using their mobile phones. Combining their efforts[68] they took to posting the pictures on their blogs as well as uploading them on YouTube in both English and Arabic. This brought forward a wave of uploads of other videos captured in a similar fashion bringing to view vivid accounts of similar gang harassment that had occurred previously. This encouraged victims of the attacks to share the experiences they had endured with biographical blogs, such as 'Wounded girl from Cairo[69]' who published gory pictures of an injury a woman had sustained while escaping into a taxi (Otterman 2007).

Whilst there was some coverage in the international press on this story, in Egypt itself, only *Rose Al Youssef*, a pro-government magazine, reported it, deeming bloggers and other eyewitnesses to be 'liars' (EL-Naggar et al 2006). Official statements also denied the attacks claiming that no women had come forward to file

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[67] Egypt has been under a 'state of emergency' since 1967. The emergency law was imposed during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, reemployed following the assassination of President Anwar Sadat and has been renewed at regular intervals ever since.

[68] Wael Abbas [http://misrdigital.blogspirit.com, http://arabist.net/arabawy/;
http://www.sandmonkey.org/.

[69] http://woundedgirlfromcairo.blogspot.com.

a police report. This was reported in the typical spirit of making the women scapegoats based on the premise that they would have provoked these attacks on themselves. This blame game discouraged the victims from filing complaints to the police. Even within the blogosphere itself, Manal, a prominent Egyptian blogger, wrote that women who open the subject of sexual abuse often get hundreds of anonymous comments of abuse. She writes[70] 'blaming the victims is the most common response but sometimes they even deny it happens at all…'

Another controversial event took place in November 2006, when two Egyptian police officers detained a minibus driver, Imad al-Kabir, for interfering in an argument between his cousin and policemen. Imad was detained at a police station where he was beaten and sodomized. The scene was recorded on one of the officers' mobile phones as a warning message to other drivers about the consequences of angering the police. The video, which was passed on through mobile phone communication, leaked out to an Egyptian blogger called Demagh MAK. Following Demagh MAK, other bloggers who were reputed amongst the blogging community for their activism, such as Wael Abbas, covered the story. In response to pressure exerted by the bloggers, *El-Fagr* and *El-Masry el-Yawm* [two prominent independent newspapers] published a feature article on violence against suspects in the country's police stations, identifying the officers in the video, and describing a second, even more brutal video.

The high profile of Egyptian bloggers, many of whom published in English, gained attention from international human rights organizations and the press. Alaa Fattah and Manal[71], a married couple who are programming gurus, are amongst the best-known personalities of early activist bloggers. The couple created a site called Manal's Bit Bucket, which served both as a blog and an aggregator of other Egyptian blogs. Alaa was detained in 2006 after protesting against the politically-motivated trial of two judges who exposed widespread fraud in the recent elections. The Free Alaa campaign was widely circulated within the blogosphere and reported in the international press. Allegedly, the Free Alaa banners received 150,000 daily hits on

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[70] http://www.manalaa.net/eid_a_festival_of_sexual_harrasement
[71] http://www.manalaa.net/

U.S. sites per day[72]. Wael Abbas alone has been interviewed by CNN, Reuters, *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post* and many more. Blogger Abdul Kareem Nabeel Suleiman Amer[73], who was sentenced to four years in prison for alleged anti-religious rhetoric and insulting Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, received wide coverage which included the BBC, the *International Herald Tribune*, AP and other English language print media. Many of these early bloggers' activities coincided with Kifaya, which was seen by Western politicians and media outlets as a promising movement for reform (Radsch, 2008: 6).

Several bloggers from Lebanon and Syria said in interviews that they first heard of blogging through Arab satellite TV coverage of the Egyptian bloggers. Firas (LB6), a Lebanese blogger, said he began to blog in 2007 after watching a show on Al Jazeera Television on Egyptian bloggers. Similarly, Fadi (SB5), a Syrian student and blogger, began to blog after reading about Egyptian blogs in the press. He said:

> I particularly remember reading about the [Kefaya] strikes in Egypt and was made conscious of what a massive role blogs played in it. It was then that I realised that blogs were a responsibility, a message to and for the benefit of the common people.

Similarly, Akram (SB10), a Syrian blogger, told me during an interview that he believes that the proliferation of Syrian bloggers in 2008 could be due to the activities of the Egyptian bloggers. He said 'everyone can tell you that in 2008 the number of blogs in Syria rose. Maybe because of the example of Egypt and that those bloggers were getting media attention'.

It is important to note here that there is an ambiguous relationship between blogging and the field of journalism. While bloggers want to be distinct and separate from it, having their own style, and assuming more freedom. At the same time, a big form of legitimacy and reference for bloggers is sought outside the field of blogging, in forms such as newspaper articles, media appearances and honours[74].

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[72] http://www.manalaa.net/
[73] http://karam903.blogspot.com/
[74] This is similar to field of literary field that Bourdieu researched where, on the one hand, there is a tendency towards autonomy where peer reference and review appears priority. On the other hand, a tendency away from autonomy, were legitimacy is sought outside the field from book sales, media

Up against the major achievements of the Egyptian bloggers, Syrian bloggers would often describe the Syrian blogosphere as 'un-important' and 'irrelevant', compared to the massive number and success of the Egyptian blogosphere. One blogger wrote in the comment box of the questionnaire:

> Blogs in Syria are a *motafakak* [fragmented] society that does not cooperate and are not united in contrast to Egyptian blogs that are united and that were able to meet, strike and bring results

Yet the coverage that Egyptian bloggers at the time received for some bloggers was seen as counter productive. Anas Tawileh, a Syrian blogger, wrote in an email to me about my research[75]:

> The evolution of blogging in Egypt and how the term became synonymous with "Opposition", in my view, limited the value that blogging can play in the Egyptian society. I remember one day when I was talking in Bibliotheca Alexandrina and started to talk about blogging that the organizer of the event actually sent me a small note saying:" Please, we do not want to speak politics here!

Another Syrian blogger expressed his dismay with how blogging is framed. Omar (SB3) who blogs about Syrian everyday life and activities, said that 'people always think of politics when the word blog is mentioned because of Kifaya and the opposition [using blogs for activism]'. He continued; 'it spoilt the image of blogging'. He added that he would rather stay away from political or sensitive issues and wants to blog on social issues but because of the above mentioned association of blogging, people have a hard time believing that he does not have political objectives. However, while Omar doesn't want the image of blogging to be associated with politics, he was still directing me to more 'influential' political bloggers to interview. He was confused as to why I wanted to interview him deeming his blog as nothing 'important'.

While the very first Egyptian bloggers may have been pro-democracy liberal activist bloggers, these voices do not measure up to the range of political blogs available

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appearances, honours etc (Swartz, 1997:127).
[75] Email exchanged as response to call for interview in Syria. Anas was not in Syria at the time but sent me a long email about his thoughts on the blogosphere. Email exchanged on 03/09/08

online today that are in 'opposition' to the government. A substantial opposition movement today in Egypt is the Muslim Brotherhood. As their name indicates, their members are not secular, liberal, or strictly nationalist. They are also, overwhelmingly, not Jihadists calling for violence. The main language they use on their blogs is Arabic. They are young Egyptians using the web to voice their concerns and while they are being imprisoned and arrested for expressing their opinion online, the media, internationally and locally, hardly cover it[76]. Critically, they are also using blogs to contest issues within their organization, to be noticed by senior members of the Brotherhood and to improve their position within the Muslim Brotherhood[77]. Yet the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood bloggers belong to an organisation is seen as contrary to the independent and free platform associated with blogs (Lynch, 2007).

As Lynch (2007) explains in his paper on the topic, even though the Muslim Brotherhood bloggers use "the very same tools and campaigning methods as the [secular, pro-democracy] bloggers", it is unlikely they will "gain the support and coverage that other blogs have". He continues "Islamist rhetoric does not fit readily under the banner of democracy". Moreover, since most of the coverage of Egyptian blogs was by Western media, the media did not have access to the Muslim Brotherhood blogs that were in Arabic. Already at that time, there were prevailing modes of expression that were considered more legitimate than others. Due to the activities of the early bloggers associated with Egypt's multi-party protest movement, Kifaya (as well as a selection of other bloggers[78] from the Arab world) blogs were seen as highly liberalising and democratic in countries with stringent media controls.

Whilst the early blogger's socio-demographic make-up was similar to the 'early adopters' of technological innovations in general (Schmidt, 2007: 11), in that they were more active, opinionated and well educated, they were not *all* necessarily blogging for political or other wider altruistic purposes, as the media projected. Nor were they all building communities and bridging cultures. Many bloggers were

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[76] Abdel Moneim Mahmoud of the blog anaikhwan.net was arrested but not charged - Ikwanweb.com has numerous articles on the arrests of Egyptian Brotherhood bloggers
[77] See Lynch, M (2007a) and Al- Anani, K (2008) for more on Muslim Brotherhood bloggers.
[78] See articles on Saudi female bloggers (Abou-Alsamh 2006) or bloggers' role in Bahrain (Glasser 2005)

using blogs as a platform for individual self-expression. Yet coverage still focused on a narrow band of political activism that did not represent the vast range of blogs on the Internet.

The Egyptian blogosphere since 2006 has greatly expanded and is less homogenous in its causes and motivation than that of the blogosphere associated with Kifaya. Its socio-demographic make-up has also greatly expanded. Radsch, writing in 2008, states that the Egyptian blogosphere is now in a phase of "diversification and fragmentation, having encompassed thousands of Egyptians forming enclaves or communities of bloggers that tend to engage primarily, though certainly not exclusively, with each other". The Egyptian Cabinet Information and Decision Support Centre (Said 2008) reported that there were over 160,000[79] Egyptian bloggers in 2008 that include activists, leftists, the Muslim Brotherhood, Copts, Bahais, homosexuals, social commentators and diarists. Yet, according to Radsch (2008: 11), it was the early activist stage that established the dynamics of the Egyptian blogosphere, and which caused it to remain a sphere of contention.

Thus, it remains that most of the discourses today are still based on the image that the media portrayed when the Egyptian blogosphere was a tight-knit group of forward looking, liberal, young activists. It is often the history of a technology and the first people who use it that set the stage for its framing, argues Herring et al (2004). They state, "defining and historicizing are powerful discursive means of constructing reality, and of de facto exclusion". They advance their argument by stating that the first writing on blogs was produced by influential blog authors who were defining the weblog based on their own activities and those of the people they know, yet in doing so, they overlooked other type of blogs that they were not necessarily associated with and were not considered as news worthy (ibid). Moreover, they did not take into consideration that different communities will use the Internet in different ways and that the context and structures that surround them will have an impact on how and why they may use it. While the Egyptian Kefaya found the Internet as a useful tool to extend its operations, bloggers from different backgrounds may find that the Internet has a completely different meaning for them

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[79] IDCS estimated the number based on a sample drawn from all the available blogging domains on April 10, 2008.

and thus, will use it in different ways.

5.3 Blogging in Lebanon and Syria

5.3.1 Blogging in Syria: meanings and activities

The first known Syrian blogger (who defined himself as Syrian) was Ayman Haykal, who began to blog in October 2004 in English on 'the damascene blog'[80]. On his blogroll, he attempted to link to all the Syrian bloggers he found. In 2005, there were 66 Syrian blogs aggregated on the Damascene blog[81] (Taki, 2005). A new site, Syria Planet[82], also authored by Ayman, became the 'official' blog aggregator and portal for the Syrian community of bloggers later in 2005. At that point, most Syrian bloggers were expatriates who learned of the tool outside of Syria. As such, they blogged in English and reached out to other Syrian expatriates (Taki, 2005). My MA survey sent out to bloggers in 2005 in Syria (N=20) had only 4 respondents at the time who had claimed to write in Arabic on their blog. Moreover, blogging, at the time, was a completely novel technology and the majority of the respondents to the survey (70.2%) stated that, 'no one or very few people they knew is aware of what a blog is'. The findings from my PhD questionnaire, on the other hand, suggest that bloggers in Syria as of 2008 were mostly writing in Arabic with 22 of the sample (N=37) choosing Arabic. Most Arabic writers (n=13), stated that they blogged in classic/standard Arabic[83]. The second most common form used was a combination of standard and spoken Arabic (9 of 37).

In August 2008, a new blog and aggregator called almudawen.net (translated to 'The Blogger') was founded by Omar Mushaweh, a Syrian living in Saudi Arabia since childhood. In an interview in *Shabablak* [young people] magazine, Omar explains how 'the culture of blogging in Syria began in 2008 when word was spread about the potential benefits of such an activity'. He said 'before that most blogs were

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[80] http://damascene1.blogspot.com/
[81] Counted by myself in 2005
82 http://ww.syplanet.com/
[83]Standard/Classical Arabic is the formal written version of Arabic. It is the common language in the Arab world. Spoken (or colloquial) Arabic is the local dialect that often has influences from other languages. In Lebanon and Syria, the dialects are very similar to each other and have roots in Aramaic.

aggregated under Syria Planet, which consisted of a majority of English language blogs written by Syrian expatriates' (Shabablak 2008: 2).

In April 2009, there were already 257 blogs aggregated on the blog portal, Al Mudawen and 368 on Syria Planet. Since Syria Planet began aggregating in 2004, many bloggers on its portal may have stopped blogging since then. In February 2010, Al Mudawen had aggregated 444 Syrian blogs, while Syria Planet aggregated 494 bloggers[84]. Most of the blogs on the two aggregators are the same, yet some choose to belong to one aggregator and not the other due to language or ideological preferences. The new Syrian bloggers largely live in Syria, and a very large number of newcomers blog in Arabic. Below are the statistics that Al Mudawen[85] gathers every month.

Table 5.1 - Almudawen.net statistics (Syrian Bloggers)

Al Mudawen Statistics	April 2009	February 2010
Number of blogs	257	444
Arabic blogs	187	342
English blogs	26	35
Bi-lingual blogs	44	67
Female bloggers	35	60
Male bloggers	222	384
Bloggers inside Syria	173	307
Bloggers outside Syria	84	137
Number of posts	7061	20,710

The sudden increase in the number of Syrian bloggers writing in Arabic could be attributed to the fact that, in 2006, most blog hosting tools had began to support the Arabic language. Before that, people could write their text posts in Arabic but the user interface was in English. Internet in Syria had also become more accessible and available around the same time and there was an increase in the coverage of blogs in the media.

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[84] Both counted by myself
[85] The Syrian blog aggregator Al Mudawen, puts together a monthly report on the number of blogs it aggregates [http://www.almudawen.net/ar/stats]

The new blog aggregator, coupled with the rapid and sudden increase in the number of Syrian blogs, and the achievements of other Arab bloggers, had created a hopeful attitude in the Syrian blogosphere at the time of interviews in 2008. Given the restrictions they are subject to and the general autocratic surveillance and clamping down on the mainstream media, and perhaps due to the prevailing discourses surrounding blogs, there is a sense of using blogs for political and social emancipation as they could potentially utilise this new platform that allows anonymity as a venue for uncensored self-expression. As discussed in Chapter 2.1.2, Syria has a press law that gives the regime the freedom to suspend or close any publication they deem. Private media operate under an unwritten conformation of what is permissible and have regular contact with the Ministry of information.

Omar Mushaweh explains 'blogs are not for entertainment or fun only, but we must use it for objectives that will bring back the Syrian society to its health' (ibid). Fadi (SB5), a Syrian blogger, talks passionately about what blogging means to him in an interview in 2008 and differentiates the activity from its predecessor, the forum which he explains is for 'meaningless chit chat and when a subject is put up for debate on it, no is interested'. He continues to explicate how blogs are different from forums by stating that 'forums are for stupid things; blogs are on a higher scale. On blogs people like to debate things and have opinions and those who don't…well no one reads them'. He differentiates the type of people who are blogging with those he meets everyday

> [in Syria] its very very (sic) hard to find people who will accept this kind of thinking….most people are just not interested whether you are blogging about important issues, talking about it , whether you are talking about atheists etc. They just want to eat, drink, have fun. Bloggers though, well it's totally different. I have met with many people that I have benefited much from their cultural knowledge and quickly too. I have learnt so much from them…out of all my [offline] friends, I think I only have one in which I like his ideas and I can debate things with…in blogging its different, if something happens, everyone has an opinion. Even if the opinions are different, at least they all have their own perspective. I don't find this at all in my daily life…

Indeed, most of the Syrian bloggers interviewed complain about the general passivity when it comes to discussing issues in the public sphere in Syria. Hasan (SB2) states that:

> we [Syrians] are brought up not to be active. We have been taught to care only about our personal issues …the sense of civil duty is very hard for us to be active on...so very few people blog about these issues….

Maya (SB1), a female Syrian blogger explains, '… human rights, freedom of speech etc…in Lebanon you go to t-marbouta [a café named after a letter of the Arabic alphabet] and everyone is talking about this. We don't have this here [in Syria]…'.

Indeed Syria has been under the Baathist regime since 1970 with repressive policies on any form of dissent or outspoken political debate (see Chapter 2.1.2). Since the age group of most bloggers ranges between 26-31, most of them only know of Syria under this repressive regime. Yet while many complain about the passivity of the Syrian populace and find that Syrian bloggers are more opinionated and active than those writing in form, out of those living in Syria, very few challenge the prevalent attitudes in a very direct way and even fewer tackle political or challenging social issues. Syria is an authoritarian country, where centralized rote learning is standard and where there are no public libraries. This has produced, as bloggers said during the interviews I conducted, a culture that feels like its hands are tied. Bloggers often talk about what they think blogs should be like rather than what they believe them to be.

Findings in the questionnaire conducted in 2008 demonstrate that 22 of the Syrian bloggers who answered the survey (N=37) write about 'private thoughts, activities and reflections'. This is followed by bloggers citing that they discuss 'Human Rights issues and development' and 'social issues in country of origin'. The category "Local political issues" came remarkably low with only three people out of 37 (8.1%) who responded claiming it to be a topic they discussed on their blog in comparison to nine out of 27 (33.3%).

Table 5.2 – What topics do you blog about (Syria)

Topic blogged about	Origin	Total No. of respondents	Average rank
International political issues	Syria	17	3.4
Activities, private thoughts and reflections	Syria	22	1.27
Poetry, literature and art	Syria	14	2.5
Religious and spiritual matters	Syria	6	2
Human rights issues or development	Syria	19	2.8
Local current affairs	Syria	20	3.05
International current affairs	Syria	17	3.4
Political issues in country of origin	Syria	3	3.66
Social issues in country of origin	Syria	16	2.31

This is similar to the research findings in 2005 (Taki, 2005) that surveyed bloggers in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, which also provided evidence that bloggers in Syria discuss political issues the least out of the three countries. Only three out of the 20 Syrian bloggers at the time asserted that they write about 'politics in country of origin' with the majority writing about 'day to day activities'. *Shabablak* magazine interviewed nine Syrian bloggers about their use of blogs. Aloush[86], a prominent Syrian blogger, said, "the majority of Syrian bloggers write about their thoughts and concerns of their everyday lives".

Indeed, a new technology will not suddenly bring about changes and abolish political and social structures. As discussed in Chapter 2.3.1, how one identifies oneself is affected by the structural identifications that come about vis-à-vis others, their history and their past interactions. Whilst bloggers may express their aspirations for political and social reform they face regulatory and other structural elements that may constrain their activities. Fadi (SB5) for example complains about Syrians living abroad who overtly criticise the state. He gives the example of Omar Mushaweh, the author of the aggregator Al Mudawen who has been in exile in Saudi Arabia since childhood. On his personal blog, Marfaa[87], Omar criticises the state and writes openly on his views about authoritarianism and the regime. Fadi describes

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[86] http://alloushblog.wordpress.com/
[87] http://www.almarfaa.net/

Omar's blog as 'too opposition and direct. People don't like that as it is not practical for people here'. He compounds his argument by saying that this creates problems for many who fear being associated and possibly implicated with him. Many bloggers, he says, are hesitant to link to him for these reasons. Indeed, most bloggers within Syria do not link to bloggers that are outright opposition out of fear. Fadi continues to talk about Omar, mentioning that 'for me, Omar is not really in Syria, he is in Saudi and is always criticising. I don't like this, stop theorising – you just can't do that if you are in Syria'.

Akram (SB10), a Syrian activist and blogger in exile in Beirut[88] explained in an interview that he had linked to Syrian bloggers in the past who lived in Syria. However, they asked him to remove the link to their blog out of fear. He explains that instead of public links or comments, he communicates with bloggers through private messages but would never publish the messages without their permission. He continued to explain the constraints that bloggers in Syria face, stating, 'In Egypt people go on the streets and do stuff. In Syria even if they do say stuff online, they just cannot implement anything on the ground'.

Maurice[89] a journalist and blogger, explains in an interview conducted later than the main fieldwork how people in Syria may be outspoken online but when it comes to 'the real thing, no one dares to do anything'. He gives the example of a protest he had organised on Facebook against the Syrian government decision to ban Facebook[90]. Maurice explained that around 1000 people had signed up to the group on Facebook and wrote that they were attending the event. However, the only two people who he says 'eventually dared to show up' to the protest were Maurice himself and the friend who had set up the Facebook group.

Whilst there are certain structural elements that constraint bloggers' activities, this does not mean they are internalised by different people in the same way, or that

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[88] His whole family have been in exile in Lebanon for their political activism against the Syrian government for years.
[89] Maurice, a journalist and blogger, was interviewed later than the other bloggers during a BBC related visit to Syria in October 2009. He later freelanced for the Syria component of the project with the BBC.
[90] Facebook is still officially banned but it is one of the most popular websites in Syria. Syrians access it through proxies.

structures operate in the blogosphere in exactly the same way they do in other contexts. These structural elements are *mediated* in different contexts and there are contested and discrepant practices emerging from them. Some practices may have more legitimacy than others within the group of bloggers one socialises with. Maya (SB1), for example, openly writes about homosexuality on her blog and is quite open about her own sexuality. In her everyday life in Syria, she could not express her views on the topic and she finds blogging to be a means to express it more openly. She mentioned in a conversation we had in Damascus in November 2009, that she gets 'hate' mail from people reading her blog on a daily basis, acknowledging that the majority of Syrian society do not accept her views on the subject. Yet the dynamics of the blogosphere and the support she gets for writing about 'civil issues' allow her to put this subject matter openly there[91]. On the Internet, the language she uses is more accepted than it would be offline and she has more leeway to write about civil issues than she would in her everyday life in Syria. This is an example that illustrates that the online and offline are not copies of each other, nor are they distinct. There are certain practices and hierarchies within the blogosphere that may allow more leeway (or less) for certain modes of expression than others.

Syrian bloggers in 2005 constituted a small group of like-minded people, mostly living abroad and blogging in English. It is now a diverse conglomeration of bloggers from different backgrounds. New entrants to blogging change its dynamics and meanings and there are contested views on what form of blogging is legitimate (see Chapter 7 and 8). The Syrian blogosphere remains one of the most unpublicised blogospheres in the Arab world. Very few articles have been written about it in the press unless it relates to censorship or imprisonment of bloggers. This may be due to the small number of Syrian blogs, its very recent growth and the fact that most bloggers do not have access to blogspot.com or Maktoob.com[92] and are thus isolated from other Arab bloggers.

5.3.2 Blogging in Lebanon: meanings and activities

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[91] See Chapter 6.3.1 on blogging and language which discussed the rift that occurred between Arabic bloggers and English language bloggers regarding the issue of homosexuality.
[92] They are both banned in Syria. Most Syrian bloggers use WordPress.

The Lebanese began to blog in 2004, no earlier than the Syria expatriate bloggers, and had a blog aggregator under the name of 'Lebanonheartblogs[93]'. Two critical events led to the sudden growth in the number of bloggers in Lebanon. One was the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Al Hariri in February 2005. Rallying at the time culminated in the Cedar Revolution[94] that came into play demanding justice on his assassination. The other event was the violent July 2006 war between Israel and Lebanon/Hezbollah (see Chapter 2.1.1)

In 2004, there were around 130 Lebanese bloggers, over half of whom were resident abroad (Taki, 2005). Yet in the period between February 2005 and June 2005, several hundred blogs were created - the majority of them to express responses to the changes and uprisings occurring following Hariri's assassination. Exact numbers for the Lebanese blogosphere are not available. The Lebanese blog aggregator lists[95] over 300 blogs, but it has not been updated since the end of 2006 when it closed down. In the meantime, the owners of many of these blogs have stopped blogging, during which time countless other blogs have emerged.

Perceptions and generalisations by Lebanese bloggers about the Lebanese blogosphere and other bloggers, expressed in interviews, show that in 2008 bloggers felt knowledgeable about and familiar with the rest of the blogosphere because of the tightly knit community that had sprung up and their offline meetings. The first bloggers were meeting with each other following an initiative by Nour El-Assaad, an active female blogger in 2005 who has since stopped blogging[96]. In 2007, Ghassan (LB9), a Lebanese blogger, described the Lebanese blogosphere as being 'more on the intellectual side of the spectrum of society. Blogging gives bloggers a medium to show off …' Another Lebanese blogger, Zeina (LB8), described them as:

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[93] http://www.lebanonheartblogs.blogspot.com/

[94] A series of demonstrations took place in downtown Beirut following Hariri's assassination and calling for the withdrawal of Syrian troops and influence from Lebanon. The largest one took place on March 14th 2005. The pro-government, anti-Syrian alliance is currently referred to as the March 14th alliance. The investigation into Hariri's assassination is ongoing but many believe that Syria was directly involved in it.

[95] Counted by myself on the Lebanon Blog Aggregator: http://lebanonaggregator.blogspot.com/

[96] The same group still meets often, despite the fact that many stopped blogging. I attended one of their meetings that took place at Costa Café on March 19, 2008 in Beirut during my first fieldwork session.

> Lebanese bloggers are not the same type but they are of a certain age group, a certain education, there are common things between them such as love of writing. …But they are diverse in opinion and their historical views of things.

Lebanese political blogger Samir (LB4), said:

> When we used to have meetings for bloggers, the local ones used to gather around 10 – 12 people at most. If we have a meeting in summer or Christmas when most of the bloggers do visit, we can have up to 30 people in the meetings. [Many Lebanese bloggers live abroad] because most of that age group that makes up the majority of the bloggers are actually outside the county. It's the reality of the country. No other reason. They are part of the population and so just like other part of the population, they are spread around.

Indeed, Lebanon suffers from a widening brain drain especially amongst those with a higher educational level within the age group of 26 and 31 - which represents the majority of bloggers within the Lebanese blogosphere. The brain drain was exacerbated after the events of the war in 2006. While the general rhetoric in the blogosphere, in interviews and on the content of blogs, indicates that bloggers had high expectations for the emancipating power of blogging in 2006, bloggers in Lebanon today do not talk of any sense of unity towards other bloggers in the same way they did during the 2005 uprising and the war and before. The Lebanon – Israel war in 2006 was the first blogged about war on this scale (Marvin & Saivetz 2007). The Lebanese bloggers used the medium to depict what was occurring on the ground and for some, to secure aid for civilians who were hurt or displaced from their homes. Sarah (LB10) who began her blog during the July 2006 war explains in an interview how her blogging activities allowed her to help families abroad connect with their displaced families in Lebanon. She said:

> I was blogging in the North [of Lebanon] and I got a call from an Australian news service and they said we saw your blog and we want you to comment. So I'm doing interviews with an Australian news service which then led to calls from some Lebanese in Australia saying we can't call our family in the South[97] so could

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[97] The South of Lebanon and southern suburbs of Beirut (Hezbollah's main strongholds) were evacuated as they were the main target by the Israeli forces. Over a million Lebanese were displaced from their homes. http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/news/opendoc.htm?tbl=NEWS&id=450810332

> you connect us? So it kind of opened up these connections. It was quite heart breaking to talk to these families…

Since many bloggers wrote in English and were well versed in the language used for campaigning and reaching out to the outside world, the media picked up on their stories extensively. Hundreds of new blogs emerged during this time to express outrage about the destruction occurring and to reach out to the world. Examples include a joint effort by friends on http://july2006waronlebanon.blogspot.com/ blog, which comprised a mix of personal stories, media stories and analysis. War on Lebanon, July-August 2006[98] was also created during the course of the Israeli onslaught of violence by Lebanese-French teacher as a 'diary about the Israeli offensive on Lebanon after the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers by Hezbollah on July 12, 2006', as she describes it on her site. Her last post was written on September 13, 2006 in which she exclaimed that she was closing down the blog. She said 'I'm publishing a book out of it on the events of this summer, after two months where my personal experience of that terrible war was let on line, at the disposal of everyone'. During the war, the mainstream media outlets used blogs as a source from which to get quotes from 'ordinary' people, they ran pieces profiling prominent blogs, and in one case, recruited a student living in Beirut to keep a blog-style journal featured on a major U.S. network's website (Ward, 2007).

What marked this conflict as unique was that it was the first time that civilians from 'enemy' countries were communicating from both sides in real time. It is illegal for Lebanese to have any kind of contact with Israelis and it is counted as treason and could lead to a prison sentence and passport confiscation. Yet Lebanese people - both in Lebanon and abroad - were very active in getting messages across and debating, often fighting, with Israeli civilians via blogs and email about what was happening. The Lebanese in general are less worried about legal consequences than the Syrians. The government was never seen as a forceful power and was often weak and divided during civil strife and wars, against opposing parties and other forces.

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[98] http://waronlebanon2006.blogspot.com/

With the exception of a few, the conversations occurring between the two sides were a mere assertion of an essential identity and opinion rather than real dialogue[99]. The battleground was extended from the ground to the blogosphere. Moreover, an organised online war took place when the Israeli Foreign Ministry ordered trainee diplomats, who were later dubbed 'cyber soldiers' by the media, to track websites and blogs through this software, so they would be alerted to anti-Israeli rhetoric on the Web and could post the contrary view. They used megaphone software that could be downloaded from a website the Ministry had set up called 'Give Israel Your Support'. The *cyber soldiers* would move from one poll or blog to another and write one-off replies to posts that were deemed against Israel (Yonit, 2006). The Israeli government's interest during the summer war showed how seriously they were taking this new communication medium and that they were ready to invest resources to change the rhetoric surrounding the war. It also showed that the Internet does not present a picture of a new virtual world separated from the political, social and economic over determinations of the old 'real' world (Loader, 1998).

More recently, many of the war bloggers stopped updating their blogs. What used to be a more centralized group of bloggers is now dispersed and separated by topic, ideology and language. During the 2006 war the Lebanese bloggers were more or less united against the atrocities that were occurring on the ground and most of them blogged about that together. However, the 2006-2009 subsequent political deadlock that divided the country between the Western backed government March 14th forces and the March 8th opposition led by the pro-Syrian, Hezbollah and its Shiite and Christian Partners, was reflected in the blogosphere. It was a period of major protests with the two camps that could not agree on a future president. The country felt divided and there was fear of a new civil war. As one blogger who had began to blog during the war commented in the questionnaire (see Appendix G), 'blogging is a phase long gone, no results, and no real revolution ideas. It is basically boring agendas'.

The idea of the blogosphere was an agreed upon arena that would offer a unique and unbiased perspective, was quickly dismantled as a reflection of what was occurring

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[99] See Appendix I for example of post and comments between Lebanese and Israelis on a Lebanese war blog.

in the political scene and the general discourse on blogs was polarized - bringing to the attention that the bloggers weren't much more than a reflection of the country and its mainstream media - heavily divided, ideologically and politically defensive of their views. Many bloggers in Lebanon expressed disgruntlement with how the political conflicts were reflected on blogs and disappointment at the dialogue that came into play on blogs. The sectarian nature of Lebanese politics often shapes the outlook of Lebanese bloggers (Ward, 2007: 4). As Lebanese blogger Samir (LB4) explained in an interview:

> When blogging first happened it seemed like people wanted to blog for this new vision, for this new centrist way of looking at things, trying to bring people together. Trying to change the way people look at things. Yet all the events in Lebanon for the past few years [after 2006] have taken their toll on the population on the whole. You see this division and it's reflected on the blog. Right now you can see where the divisions are…Who is with this camp or that camp. Very few that you would think would stand out from these two groups, including myself.

Samir further explains how he can tell everyone's political affiliation online. He says with respect to those who do not even blog about politics, that it is very obvious where they stand in the split. When certain events happen, he explains, people have a stance on it and their stances will always reflect where they are in the political spectrum whether they spell it out or not.

Yet this doesn't mean that the divisions were equally split. Haugbolle (2007: 21) noted, that the tensions of the political divisions reflected on blogs do not reflect the level of popular support for Hezbollah and the March 8th forces. The Lebanese blogosphere is still primarily a domain for the young generation of Beirut's middle classes who played a key role in the Cedar revolution, and most bloggers back the "March 14 coalition". A few other bloggers (LB4, LB3 & LB9) also expressed this in interviews. One blogger, Ghassan (LB9), said that Lebanese bloggers have diverse, well-researched and educated opinions.

However when asked if they agreed with each other politically, he said:

> No its just me and Samir…they [other bloggers] consider us "opposition" [March 9]…and they are all government [March 14] people…they love life[100] and we are the axis of evil…hahaha which is stupid by the way… it's all the same shit

Bachir (LB3) describes Lebanese bloggers in an interview in March 2008. He said:

> They are not representative of Lebanese society. They are pro-March 14th and against any sort of solidarity with Arabs. When I first started writing on blogs, I got a comment saying, we Lebanese would never comment on your blog because you're pro-Palestinian. Can you believe it?

The political divide was also reflected on the Lebanese blog aggregator, Lebanon-heart-blogs[101], a collective effort administered by a set of approximately 30 bloggers. Contributors had a falling out over the content that was being posted on the aggregator. Many didn't feel that the posted content, which was represented by a large number of opposing contenders on different sides of the Lebanese political spectrum, was balanced accurately according to the status quo of the general blogging populous.

Bachir (LB3) continues:

> You feel a state of tiredness in the blogosphere. They used to meet offline and then they got into this terrible fight…who is going to do this and why are you censoring that. Now the Lebanese blog aggregator is dead. I used to use it all the time to see what happening in the blogosphere.

In the survey conducted in 2005, Lebanon's blogosphere in comparison to Syria's and Jordan's was extremely political with 'politics in country of origin' and 'local current affairs' being one of the most blogged about topics. In the survey I conducted in 2008, only nine bloggers (N= 29) said they blogged about politics or local current affairs. The category 'activities, private thoughts and reflections' was one of their

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[100] A slogan created by the March 14th forces "We love life" in opposition to Hezbollah backed March 8 forces. It refers to the martyrdom practices of Hezbollah members and their commitment to fight Israel. In contrast, the March 14th, 'want to live'. See Andrew Lee Butter article on slogan campaign (2007).
[101] www.lebanonheartblogs.blogspot.com.

five most blogged about topics, followed by 'poetry, literature and art'[102], signalling a move away from blogging about things related primarily to Lebanon.

Table 5.3 – What topics do you blog about (Lebanon)

Topic blogged about	Origin	Total No. of respondents	Average rank
International political issues	Lebanon	6	4.16
Activities, private thoughts and reflections	Lebanon	20	2.25
Poetry, literature and art	Lebanon	17	2.6
Religious and spiritual matters	Lebanon	7	3.7
Human rights issues or development	Lebanon	7	3.13
Local current affairs	Lebanon	9	2.88
International current affairs	Lebanon	8	2.87
Political issues in country of origin	Lebanon	9	3.66
Social issues in country of origin	Lebanon	14	2.07

Most Lebanese bloggers are now scattered with no centre or hub for their activities. Many of the first bloggers who were in close contact, removed themselves from Lebanon-heart-blogs, the blog aggregator, and narrowed down the focus of their blogs. Ramzi for example, who used to blog on Ramzi's blah blah, is now on another blog. When asked if I could interview him, he said 'I have no contact with bloggers in Lebanon. I've stopped blogging on Lebanon Hearts [the Lebanese blog aggregator] and moved my focus to other topics that don't really interest the same people in Lebanon'. If one considered that the blogosphere is a space of play (that Bourdieu calls fields), then it only exists as such to the extent that players enter into it believe in and actively pursue and compete over the prizes it offers. In other words, a field can only function as a field, in relation to the agents sustaining it. If Lebanese bloggers do not believe in it, does this mean that Lebanese blogging does not constitute a field?

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[102] Some of the most well known bloggers in Lebanon today are those of artists: See Mazen Kerbaj's blog [http://mazenkerblog.blogspot.com/], and Maya Zankoul's blog [http://mayazankoul.wordpress.com].

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter explores the history of blogging since its inception and illustrates how the practice of blogging in Lebanon and Syria is set in relation to the context that bloggers live in, rather than distinct from it. Indeed, weblogs are not universally meaningful tools but rather they acquire different meanings by those using them. While in Egypt blogs were first used in opposition to the State by a number of bloggers who were able to raise certain issues censored in the media to the fore, this does not mean that the same will occur in all countries with authoritarian regimes. As Agre, argues, the picture is more complex. The political culture has to want it and in many societies, authoritarian habits run deep (Agre, 2002: 317). Indeed, bloggers are not bloggers in an abstract; they are social and cultural beings living in a society and are still subject to a variety of social and economic conditions that act to structure their opportunities for action (Loader, 1998: 10). As such, blogging as a tool in Syria will not suddenly be used in "opposition" to the government, unless bloggers are already inclined to be in "opposition". Syrian bloggers do not regard blogging as an autonomous sphere that is safer from the offline world. In fact, they do not want to be associated (through links or any type of visible contact) with bloggers who are 'opposition' and living outside of Syria, as it is 'impractical' (SB5) to their lives.

Lebanese bloggers in interviews had expressed disillusionment with the idea that blogging would be a space removed from the divisions present in the Lebanese political and social milieus and the mainstream media. The conflicts that occurred in Lebanon between 2005-2008 were reflected online and bloggers came to judge each other with the same categorisations they use offline. Bloggers said that they could tell each other's political affiliations online from the stances that they took on the events taking place. Indeed, while the design principles of blogs make some visual cues hard to detect online (Schmitz, 1997: 85), there are other marks of distinction such as moral sentiments and linguistic skills that are easy to identify. So people are not more equal or united online, but prone to using different criteria to rate each other (ibid). Moreover, in times of struggles and conflicts or when a particular identity has been repressed or legitimized, a vital response maybe to claim value for all those labelled by that category, thus implicitly invoking it in an essentialist way

(Calhoun 1994: 17). In Lebanon, these invocations led to a disagreement between the contributors of the Lebanese blog aggregator which was represented by a large number of opposing contenders on different sides of the Lebanese political spectrum, over whether the posted content was balanced accurately according to the status quo of the general blogging populous. The disagreements ended in the closure of the aggregator. As Matei & Ball-Rokeach state (2002: 408) most literature on sociability online overestimates the capacity of the Internet to change deep-seated social and cultural arrangements and proclivities.

This chapter by depicting the diverse ways in which blogging has been used throughout time and the changing meanings it has acquired for bloggers, shows that it is an activity that is contingent and embedded in local specificities. It also shows it is not autonomous to surrounding fields, deeply connected and interrelated to the broader structural patterns and with little autonomy. A historical contextualization of the emergence of the blogging, and the key events that impacted on it, helps us understand why bloggers describe things the way they do and why certain patterns of practices have changed through time. Therefore it sets the scene for the next chapters that primarily deal with why blogger blog and who they interact with.

Chapter VI. The 'Self' Online – Shifts in Who, Why & How

Chapter 5 mapped out the historical context of the emergence of blogging both generally and specifically in Lebanon and Syria. It showed that bloggers are not isolated from the context they live in and that there are structural elements within it that position what bloggers do when they go online. This chapter begins by examining who is blogging by combining data from primary and secondary sources for comparison and reference. Motivations are then discussed in light of what blog authors have said about why they blog, yet critiquing the use of these articulations as categories that are frozen at a particular point in time. It illustrates through case studies that bloggers often change their blogging activities in relation to a wide range of factors and begins to open up the possibility that there are certain dynamics operating within their socialisation in the world of bloggers that, while embedded in their context, have taken certain meanings that are particular to the bloggers. The chapter then extracts from the case studies the markers they use, such as language and anonymity, that often shift in meaning through time.

6.1 Who is Blogging: A Comparative Approach

As outlined in Chapter 3, it is difficult to specify the exact number of bloggers in Lebanon and Syria and get a representative sample to answer the survey. Due to the small number of respondents to the survey (N=66), the results of the survey will be compared with other research conducted and with the findings from the interviews. I also provide the statistics that the Syrian blog aggregator, Al Mudawen, puts together for the blogs it aggregates. The sample of bloggers in 2008 revealed that the number of males who blogged was higher than that of females, and is significantly higher in Syria[103].

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[103] The Berkman Center of Internet and Society[103] confirmed that the Syria cluster has the second largest concentration of known male bloggers on the map at 87% male, while only 13% are female. The Al Mudawen blog aggregator also aggregates a low number of female bloggers (13.5%) in comparison to male bloggers in Syria.

Fadi (SB5), states that he only knows of about six to seven female bloggers in Syria. He comments:

> Well it reflects society. You know that women don't talk as much, don't have strong opinions. Its so constrained. The female bloggers are particular in that they are outspoken. For example blogger 'Ranoush', she travels a lot and has interesting things to say, she is of a certain social status, her parents are engineers and doctors. …Fatousha and Souraya are both journalism students so they need to write…Maya started blogging when she was in Beirut and so on and so forth

Al Mudawen's statistics also show that in 2010 (N=444), 86.5% of bloggers aggregated on the site were male and 13.5% female (see table 61). The age group that blogged the most in both Lebanon and Syria in 2008 was between 26 - 31 (55% and 42% respectively). In Lebanon the second highest age group was 32-36, older than that of bloggers from Syrian origin (20-25). Most bloggers were highly educated with the majority having a university degree. They were also largely single. The table below recaps the statistics of the questionnaire found in Chapter 5.

Table 6.1 – Demographic Snapshot of Bloggers

Attribute	Lebanon N=29	Syria N=37
Sex		
Male	17 (60.7%)	21 (65.6%)
Female	11 (39.3%)	11 (34.4%)
Age		
14-19	0	1
20-25	2	13
26-31	16	14
32-37	6	3
38-43	1	2
44-49	3	0
Missing	1	4
Education		
Did not complete school education	1	0
School	0	1
Technical qualifications	0	2
University degree	11	22

MA	11	8
Doctorate	3	1
Missing	3	3
Country of Education		
Outside home country for one of two highest degrees	48%	36%
Marital status		
Engaged/relationship	5	4
Divorced	3	0
Married	5	6
Single	15	23

The only empirical research on bloggers across the Arab world was conducted by the Berkman Centre for Internet and Society (Etling et al. 2009) in 2009. It indicated that Arab bloggers are overwhelmingly young and male. Out of 4000 blogs that they had hand-coded, over 60% were male and just 34% female[104]. Three-quarters of bloggers were under the age of 35, with the majority (45%) in the 25 to 35 year old age range. Only 9% were over 35, and almost none over 60 years of age. For 13% of the sample (N= 4000), coders could not assess a bloggers' age range (ibid).

Research conducted on blogs across the world shows similar patterns of demographics. Technorati, the blog search engine, sent a survey to a random sample of blogs in the U.S, Europe and Asia on August 2008[105]. Their sample consisted of 48% who live in North America, with the next largest group, 27%, coming from Europe, and 13% from Asia. The responses received (N=1,290) indicted that 66 % of bloggers were male, with just over a third of all bloggers falling into the 25 - 34 age range. More than half were employed full time and tend to be more educated and affluent than the general Internet population. The table below summarises their findings.

Table 6.2 - Technorati Blogger Statistics in 2008

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[104] This is nevertheless a higher proportion of female bloggers than was found in their Iran study. The study was divided into thematic clusters all of which had less than 30% of women blogging in them. The cluster with the largest female minority were the 'poetry' and 'sectarian reformist' clusters. See http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/publications/2008/Mapping_Irans_Online_Public for full research.
105 Details of research can be found on [http://technorati.com/blogging/state-of-the-blogosphere/].

Global Snapshot of Bloggers

Demographics	U.S. Bloggers (N=550)	European Bloggers (N=350)	Asian Bloggers (N=173)
Male	57%	73%	73%
Age			
18-34 years old	42%	48%	73%
35+	58%	52%	27%
Single	26%	31%	57%
Employed full-time	56%	53%	45%
Household income >$75,000	51%	34%	9%
College graduate	74%	67%	69%
Average blogging tenure (months)	35	33	30
Median Annual Investment	$80	$15	$30
Median Annual Revenue	$200	$200	$120
% Blogs with advertising	52%	50%	60%
Average Monthly Unique Visitors	18,000	24,000	26,000

In Britain, which has a much higher Internet diffusion rate than the Arab world, Brake (2009) found the blogosphere to constitute a particular socio-demographic make-up. He sent a survey in 2005 to bloggers in the UK and received 150 responses. Of all those who indicated their education level, 45% were graduates and a further 21% were postgraduates. Sixty percent of respondents identified themselves as middle class and 13% as upper middle class – only 15% self-identified as working class. In Japan, Muria & Yamashita (2007) sent a survey in 2004 which received 1434 responses and they found that 68.6% of bloggers were male, over 52.7% in their 20's and 29.7% in their 30's. The findings across most contexts between 2004 and2007 indicate that the demographics of bloggers are not representative of the population in general; males are blogging more than females, bloggers are young with the majority falling between 25-35 and their level of education is high.

Some studies in developed nations have observed that some divides in Internet use (gender, region, age, rural/urban) have been diminishing. DiMaggio et al (2004: 20) conducted a literature review of surveys in both 1998 and 2000 and found that new users had lower incomes and less education than Americans who had been online longer[106]. While some gaps may be closing as Internet diffusion increases and barriers to entry decrease (in terms of cost, speed etc), it is problematic to go on to project that that what people do when they go online (after access) will be equally

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[106] DiMaggio et al (2004) found increased technology diffusion does not represent a natural occurrence but is a direct result of State initiatives to encourage the Internet's rapid evolution.

distributed across populations. There are variations in what people do when they are online and different uses of the Internet require different competencies and skills.

Indeed the education level that bloggers (N=66) wrote in the survey ranged[107] from students, doctors, designers, technical consultants to writers and journalists. The educational level as depicted in Table 6.1 was relatively high as well. Research conducted by Zillien & Hargittai (2009: 278) suggests that despite new opportunities to engage in distribution of content over the Internet, relatively few people are taking advantage of these recent developments. They found that creation and sharing [content on the internet] is not randomly distributed among a diverse group of young adults. They argue that consistent with existing literature, the forms of creative activity that people choose to engage in are related to a person's socioeconomic status whether online or not (ibid). Inequalities concerning cost and speed of technical equipment will most likely decline, they argue, whereas differences in Internet usage are likely to persist as people with similar levels of access are likely to engage with a technology in fundamentally different ways (Zillien & Hargittai 2009: 278, Boyd 2009).

Indeed, the practice of blogging is predicated upon more than simply material or technological preconditions. It also involves a propensity to write and not everyone may have the skill set to produce and share information creatively on the Internet, or perhaps more importantly the desire to speak to the public[108]. Whilst it is important to understand the structural impediments surrounding the use of blogging, we also need to look at the shifting meanings that bloggers have for their blogging activities. If we can discern what the tool represents to bloggers themselves over different periods of time, we may be better equipped at understanding why it is only

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107 I preferred to leave that field in the survey it as an empty box rather than attempt to categorize the professional fields in Lebanon and Syria, which are not only largely diverse but also labeled differently. The responses from Lebanon and Syria are in Appendix H. There were no overarching patterns or major differences between blogging and profession in both countries.

108 Bernstein in 'Class, Codes and Control' (1971) on restricted/elaborated speech states that class has an effect on the type of speech one uses. Restricted speech, according to him, is one that takes for granted understood meaning and assumptions while elaborated speech does not assume shared understanding and thus is more elaborate with full complicated sentences and use of uncommon words. He argues (ibid) that the middle class who are generally more culturally mobile have access to restricted and elaborated speech while working class have access to restricted speech. Bernstein (1971: 135) states that society may place different values on the orders of experience elicited, maintained and progressively strengthened through the different coding systems of language. In the education field for example, the use of elaborated speech is better valued.

appropriated by a certain spectrum of society and what are the varying cultural, economic and linguistic types of capital that are required to partake in it[109].

Indeed, looking at demographics at a certain point in time does not depict the changing status of new entrants to blogging. As discussed in Chapter 5, new entrants to blogging in Syria changed rapidly between 2005-2008. In contrast to the early expatriate English language bloggers, the new entrants were living in Syria and blogging in Arabic. Similarly in Lebanon, the political disagreements between bloggers after the 2006 war, and that also led to the closing down of the aggregator, had bloggers reassessing the value of blogging as a tool that is distinct from the schisms that exist in society. Understanding the motivations that bloggers have for their activities and the meanings they attach to it through time may reveal why it is an activity that privileges a certain habitus.

6.2 Why Bloggers Blog

6.2.1 Bloggers' motivations

Much research conducted on blogging has focused on motivations for blogging. The two methods frequently used to research bloggers' motivations consist of asking bloggers directly why they blog through surveys, or by deriving motivations through content/textual analysis of the topics covered online. Research focused on survey findings include Lenhart and Fox's (2006) study that received responses from 223 bloggers through a questionnaire sent in the U. S. It revealed that the primary motivations for blogging are creative self-expression and recording personal experiences. In other national contexts, similar findings were found; Schmidt (2007: 11) researched motivation through an online survey (N=5,246) and found that the dominant motives for maintaining a blog are personal expression and, to a

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[109] As will be discussed in section 7.3.1 on language, we can already see that the linguistic capital required to blog in Syria in 2005 was proficiency in English. This was due to the fact that blog hosting tools did not support the Arabic language but also that all the bloggers from Syria were writing in English and those wanting to communicate with other Syrian bloggers had to blog in English to do so. However, new entrants to blogging have contested these dominant practices and the majority are now blogging in Arabic.

"somewhat lesser extent, supporting existing social relations". Trammell et al. (2006) content-analyzed front pages of 358 Polish-language blogs and concluded that most blogs are 'diary like'. Nardi et al (2004a) is a rare example of a study that used ethnographic interview methods to find out about bloggers' motivation. They concluded from interviewing 23 bloggers in the U.S that bloggers blog for many reasons: documenting one's life; providing commentary and opinion; expressing deeply felt emotions; articulating ideas through writing; and forming and maintaining community forums (ibid).

The questionnaire sent out in Lebanon and Syria in 2008 asked bloggers to rank what motivated them to blog from a list of options derived from the interviews of the first fieldwork session. A ranking system was deployed for the different categories of motivations[110]. Respondents could rank the themes from one being the most important and five the least. There were eleven themes in total and an 'other' option which they could rank as well. The table below shows the total number of respondents who picked each option and the average rank they gave that option.

Table 6.3 – What motivated you to start a blog?

Motivations for blogging	Origin	Frequency	Average Rank
To get others to read my ideas and opinions	Lebanon (N=29)	18	2.5
	Syria (N=37)	22	2.81
	Total	40	
To interact with others	Lebanon (N=29)	13	3.1
	Syria (N=37)	16	2.68
	Total	29	
To feel part of a community	Lebanon (N=29)	6	3.1
	Syria (N=37)	15	2.9
	Total	21	
To make changes in society for social development	Lebanon (N=29)	10	2.8
	Syria (N=37)	20	2.65
	Total	30	

[110] The motivation categories constructed in the questionnaire were based on the interviews carried out with bloggers in the first fieldwork session (See Chapter 3).

To develop my skills (writing / art / design / photography / other...)	Lebanon (N=29)	13	2.9
	Syria (N=37)	15	3
	Total	28	
To organize thoughts and record ideas	Lebanon (N=29)	11	2.27
	Syria (N=37)	23	2.69
	Total	34	
To offer a counter opinion or an original view	Lebanon (N=29)	9	2.7
	Syria (N=37)	15	3.5
	Total	24	
To show own perspective on some issues	Lebanon (N=29)	13	2
	Syria (N=37)	13	2.4
	Total	26	
To write about topics that are somewhat ignored	Lebanon (N=29)	6	3
	Syria (N=37)	14	2.8
	Total	20	
To express myself about a specific social or political event (please rank and specify event in text box)	Lebanon (N=29)	14	3.21
	Syria (N=37)	10	3
	Total	24	
Other (please rank and specify in text box)	Lebanon (N=29)	2	1
	Syria (N=37)	1	1
	Total	3	

The most frequently picked category, as a top five motivation to blog in both Lebanon and Syria, was "to get others to read my thoughts and ideas". The respondents who picked this option gave it an average rank of 2.5 in Lebanon and 2.8 in Syria with one being the most important and five the least. Almost half of respondents (n= 14), in Lebanon chose the option "to express myself about a specific event" as a motivation for blogging. The 2006 war and the 2005 Cedar Revolution were the two events they specified in the comment box. In Syria the second most chosen option was "To make changes in society for social development" followed by "To organize thoughts and record ideas". They both had an average rank of 2.6. In Lebanon, these two motivations were not the most popular. The second most popular motivation picked by respondents in Lebanon reveals that blogs are being used for

instrumental purposes with 13 respondents stating they use it to: "develop my skills (writing / art/ design/ photography/ other..)". The skills they put in the comment box were "web design", "technical", "photography" and "showcasing work".

The questionnaire in Lebanon and Syria as well as the findings in other contexts show similar results in that the primary reason for blogging is to communicate to an audience and be read. However, what do these articulations and box-ticking of survey exercises really tell us? Is it not an obvious motivation that bloggers write on a public platform to be read by others? Does it really say anything worthwhile about why bloggers blog and the differences observed in blogging practices across different contexts?

George Orwell described four principal motivations for why people write. In an essay entitled 'Why I write' (1946), he encapsulated much of the same reasoning behind bloggers' motivations that bloggers expressed in the interviews. These categorizations, he says, are not mutually exclusive but are intertwined and fluctuate from person to person and from time to time. The first reason, 'sheer egoism', he defines as the desire to be read, to be clever, to be remembered. He says "writers share this characteristic with scientists, artists, politicians, lawyers, soldiers, successful businessmen — in short, with the whole top crust of humanity". The second reason is 'aesthetic enthusiasm', that is the "perception of beauty in the external world, or, the desire to share an experience which one feels is valuable and ought not to be missed". His third reason for why he writes is what he calls 'historical impulse', which is the "desire to see things as they are, to find out true facts and to store them up for the use of posterity". His fourth reason is 'political purpose' but he uses political in the widest sense possible. Here, he means "the desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people's idea of the kind of society they should strive after". While Orwell believes that the first three motivations were the strongest in his case, he realises, upon reflection, that his books were mostly politically orientated.

He says (1946):

> When I write? It is because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing….if I lived in a peaceful age I might have written ornate or merely descriptive books, and might have remained almost unaware of my political loyalties. As it is I have been forced into becoming a sort of pamphleteer…

He then continues "in order to understand a writer; you need to understand the factors that shaped him or her and the way s/he reacted to those factors". So while most bloggers in Lebanon and Syria articulated during interviews and in the survey that they blog to be read as their primary reason for blogging, blogging tools did not create the writers, artists or political activists in them. All of those interviewed expressed a pre-existing propensity to express themselves. In Lebanon, Samir (LB4), says that he was writing about social and political issues before blogging was created and that blogging for him served as an outlet or 'anger management' as to what is going on.

Ramzi (LB5) said in the interview that he began his blog as a sort of archive for his writing on food and agriculture. He teaches at the American University of Beirut and regularly writes for magazines and journals. He said:

> The idea of a blog came first and foremost as a form of repository of all the things I found interesting. Its existence allowed me to file it in a very simple format with a good search facility. That was my primary reason for it.

Yet upon digging a little deeper, Ramzi elaborates on what really motivates his blogging activities. He says 'you may then ask why I choose to not just file my writing in a more private domain on my computer, in my drawers in the office, it's because no one can resist the lure of being read by many people. It is good to believe [that people read your blog] if you feel you have a political mission and in my case it is food, land, people, poverty'.

Similarly, Bassem (LB1), a Lebanese PhD student, said he began to blog as a way to organise all his ideas related to his PhD. He said the process of writing ideas down helps him think and organise them. He continued:

> And I also fool myself with the idea that there are people reading it….I don't just write for myself although I know what I'm doing is purely narcissistic. When people read it you feel like you have a mission and that people are waiting for you to produce.

Hasan (SB2), a Syrian blogger, said that he began his blog in June 2007 when he was researching a subject and eventually came across a well-versed blog based around the same material of interest. While he had visited a few blogs during earlier times, they were 'banal pieces of writings about everyday life' which did not interest him for the most part. However, upon discovering particular blogs that had been created in Egypt and Syria, he was captivated by the content, and inspired to start a blog himself. While Hasan studied telecommunications and enjoys a stable work life in the field, his real passion is for philosophy and the social sciences. Due to financial constraints, he opted to pursue his interests through more practical means as he explained in an interview: 'the vocations of philosophers and teachers often lead to financial hardship due to the lack of opportunity and support for them in the Middle East'. As such, Hasan concluded that this void has created a thought crisis in Syria. He said 'we have a problem and we can change it, so what is the solution? My blog is to help me think about these issues with other people here...'.

Similarly Zeina (SB8), who writes about 'feelings, problems with the family and medical problems', says she writes on a blog because it serves as another diary she once had but serves as a better archive'. Yet she later elaborates:

> The blog lets me speak to people. But this time it's not my friends and family. In fact I don't give my blog URL to them. I speak to people I don't know and we share our experiences about mental health issues.

Whilst bloggers will have valid reasons for why they blog in an interview process and can tick boxes in a survey, it is nevertheless important to go a bit further analytically than merely repeating the reasons that bloggers themselves give for blogging. Firstly, bloggers are not always aware of all the factors that have allowed

them to take action in specific ways or that have contributed to this articulated motivation. Indeed, what people say is not necessarily an index of their truths because intentionality cannot be fully understood through an interview, a questionnaire, or from the text that the subject in question writes. Wanting to be read is an obvious and valid motivation for blogging, yet without contextualising their articulations within the cultural, social, economic and political environments they inhabit and within the space they manoeuvre in, it is difficult to understand why people pursue certain strategies of action (Swidler, 1986) rather than others. Swidler critiques the idea of asking people what they value in order to explain their action[111]. She asserts, "people may share common aspirations, while remaining profoundly different in the way their culture organises their overall patterns of behaviour" (1986: 175). Indeed, habitus operates beneath the level of consciousness and discourse – thus bloggers' actions are often pre-reflective and they are not always aware of the factors that have shaped why they do what they do. What motivates someone to blog is a complex array of factors that are very much contingent upon people's context, and the various meanings associated with blogging that operate in it.

Indeed, blogging is not separated from the environment one lives in, so in politically unstable environments, bloggers will tend to voice their daily concerns. If one looks at the content of blogs in Lebanon between the events of 2005 and 2006, or interviews bloggers about their activities during that period, one would be led to believe that they were all political, civically engaged bloggers and that their primary focus is to blog about these issues. While many bloggers started blogging because of the events in 2005-2006 specifically, others were blogging for different reasons but switched their blogging activities to express themselves about the changes occurring in their lives. Moreover, some bloggers who began to blog in order to express themselves about the war changed their focus to other topics that interested them afterwards. Mazen Kerbaj, a Lebanese artist who answered the questionnaire, began to blog during the 2006 war providing up to 12 drawings a day about the situation[112]. Since the war ended, he continued to blog but as a showcase of his artwork. As one

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[111] Swidler (1986) gives the example of the culture of poverty, questioning why poor people do not take advantage of opportunities to assimilate into the dominant culture. She argues that if researchers ask a poor person what they want in life, it will most likely be the same kind of aspirations and values as the middle class would give – better education, family, and stability. Yet class similarities in aspirations in no way resolve the question of whether there are class differences in culture.
[112] Interview with Mazen Kerbaj on website: http://lebrecord.com/?p=19

of the respondents to the survey, he wrote in the comment box 'I don't plan to stop blogging until I find a reason to stop, as I waited for a reason to start in the first place which was the Israeli war in 2006'.

The survey data indicates that almost half (n=14) of the 29 respondents in Lebanon had started their blog to express themselves about a specific event that occurred. The events that they put down were either the 2005 Cedar Revolution or the 2006 war with Israel. In Syria only 10 of the 37 respondents included that option in the 1-5 rank. While Syria has politically volatile external relations, it has a relatively stable internal environment. Moreover, all 12 bloggers interviewed in Lebanon stated that when a major political event occurs in Lebanon, they will discuss it on their blog – despite the fact that they may be a purely artistic blog in essence, or even a photo blog or personal one.

Lina (LB2), a Lebanese blogger and illustrator, began her blog as a showcase for her work and to interact with people in similar fields. She said blogging was a more engaging tool than the website she used to have. She differentiates herself from other Lebanese bloggers by saying, 'most Lebanese blogs are about politics…mine is not. I have no interest'. Yet she continues to say,

> when something really big happens, like the war for example, I change how how I blog. [During the war] I was posting all the time about that. I don't do political analysis but I'm good at observing what's going on in my life and I got a lot of visitors during the war, some of whom stayed.

Similarly, Zeina (LB8) also shifted to blogging about the war and campaigning. Meanwhile Ghassan (LB9), just like Mazen Kerbaj, began his blog during the war. He explained how and why he began in detail in an interview, stating that it was exactly during the fifth week of the war and as happened to most citizens, his career was put on hold for the whole duration. He had also been going through a divorce during the war. Having been put back into bachelorhood and because of the crisis that was at hand, he had plenty of time to himself. The war gave him impetus to speak out. He had always had issues he wanted to write about concerning music, society and general day-to-day issues. Blogging proved to be a great platform and outlet from which to voice these opinions. His blog quickly began to gain momentum

and created a following, encouraging him to continue to blog. He opened a blog in English and Arabic. He said he opened his blog 'because Beirut was stigmatized' stating, 'we were getting a lot of rhetoric about Beirut being a shithole … so I wanted to show the world what people from Beirut could come up with…'. His Arabic blog mainly houses satirical voice recordings of social issues in Lebanon.

Other research conducted on blogs in times of crisis also found blogging activities to increase in response to these events. Thelwall & Stuart (2007) in their research on blogging conclude that events might precipitate or hasten the adoption of a new technology. A study (Saeed 2008) conducted by the Egyptian Cabinet Information and Decision Support Centre (IDSC) monitored the number of blogs created over a 49-month period. It showed that at least eight of those months had witnessed a significant rise in activity. These periods correspond to significant political and social events that occurred in Egypt. This suggests that public events in 2005 and 2006 in Egypt served as the real driving force behind blogging activity[113].

Indeed, blogs are not virtual environments separated from the concerns of local everyday life. In this sense, it is quite common that bloggers will draw on the subject matter that their turbulent blogging environment imposes upon them. From my interviews carried out with bloggers, it is apparent that the vast majority of bloggers are not writing about abstract issues, but rather those that have a direct effect on their lives. When personal, political or social circumstances change bloggers' activities are also seen to change. Similarly, when newcomers enter the blogging arena, the activities will also likely to change as bloggers will respond to each other.

6.2.2 Changing motivations

Quite often, there is no grand or well-formulated idea for what compels bloggers to begin their activity. Many of the early bloggers interviewed said that they began out of mere curiosity with the tool rather than a clear-cut motivation. Menchin Trevino

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[113] Over these two years, crucial events took place, such as constitutional amendments, President Mubarak's election, a crisis among Sudanese refugees, a ferry sinking, and sectarian conflicts between Muslims and Christians in Alexandria. Other regional incidents gained public interest as well, including tension in Gaza and the bloody strife in Iraq.

(2005: 9) found that some begin a blog to "research blogs and participate in the community". Similarly Brake (2009: 161) found that many initial motivations were for merely the 'pleasure of tinkering with a new tool'. Zeina (LB8) began to blog when a journalist friend of hers encouraged her to do so. She had already commenced writing a journal and soon came to the conclusion that it would be a good idea to give it an online presence. Marilyn (LB2) said she had begun after 'stumbling across the world of blogging'. During an interview she said 'I knew two people from LBF, the Lebanese blog aggregator, and they encouraged me to blog'. She has since stopped blogging. Another blogger, On Boredom, said 'I don't know why I began to blog, I was curious and it was fun'.

Indeed, a few of the interviewees said they started blogging 'to see what the fuss was all about' or to 'be part of something new that felt important' rather than wanting to express something intrinsic. While some bloggers and especially the war bloggers in Lebanon had set out with a goal in mind that would dictate their blogging activities, most of the bloggers' interviewed had changed their activities and had different motivations during the course of their blogging history.

Brady (2006) and Brake (2009) also found that motivations for blogging are not static or clear cut. Brady (2006) said that bloggers' motivations change and are often supplemented by additional motivations through time and as knowledge is acquired. Brake (2009:152) found that the bloggers he interviewed in the UK appeared to change their blogging practice over time because of changes in the way they perceived their audiences, changes in their personal motivations for blogging, changes in their circumstances and potentially because of changes in the underlying technologies. The two case studies below of a Lebanese and Syrian blogger illustrate the shifts in why and how they blog through the course of their blogging activities.

Firas (LB6), a Lebanese blogger began to blog under the name of 'Nostalgic Story Teller' when he moved to France to study for his MA degree in autumn 2005. In an interview in 2008, he said he had first begun to blog because he had arrived to university earlier than the other students, didn't know anyone in the new city and so 'was bored to death'. By 'complete coincidence' he came across a television show on Al Jazeera about political blogging in Egypt and decided to try it out. He began to

write in English about his everyday life, posting pictures of the new places he visited and what he was experiencing in those places. However, he now describes his first blogging venture as 'very silly' and 'trivial'. A few months later, Firas decided to switch to blogging in Arabic, which he felt more comfortable writing in, and began to write about a 'wide range of Lebanese social and political issues that took a story telling approach'. His parents were also writers and he found blogging a good outlet to practice on. However, during the July 2006 war, he barely wrote on his own blog but participated in a blog run by other Lebanese bloggers about the war only. After the war ended, he went back to writing on his blog but changed its focus. He now writes short fiction stories. He felt a general disgruntlement with blogging for wider political changes. He said:

> I shifted to more literary posts because originally that's what my blog was about…first it's because I felt that we were not doing anything special [by writing about current affairs/politics/society], what we were writing was in the newspapers; *Al Safir* newspaper is the pure opposition, *Al Nahar* is with the government. We were just repeating these ideas. We were not presenting anything new and we were just the voices for the politicians and different ideological factions…

Firas also began to write for the cultural section of *Al Safir*, one of the main Lebanese daily newspapers shortly after the war. Although his personal blog does not deal directly with current affairs any more, he asserts that when a local event occurs, he cannot help but comment on it. Since then, he has been writing on the same blog and in 2008 described it as 'the nucleus of a novel and a literary project'. He said '…I'm not writing for fun [as I used to]. I have a sort of project'.

Similarly, Maya a Syrian blogger who was studying in Beirut in 2005 began blogging she was living in Ashrafieh, a Christian neighbourhood in central Beirut. Her blog was centred in her experience of living there when Hariri, the former Lebanese Prime Minister, was assassinated in 2005 and fingers were being pointed at Syria as the country that was generally seen as the main culprit behind the assassination. A massive demonstration occurred in 2005 named the 'Cedar Revolution', which was successful in ejecting Syrian troops and thereby ending Syria's 15-year military presence in Lebanon. Following Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon, anti-Syrian rhetoric became louder as anti-Syrian slogans dominated the

airwaves. In the blogosphere, there were also massive campaigns to end the Syrian presence in Lebanon. This bred extreme activism by a sector of the Lebanese against Syrian people in Lebanon. Some Syrian expatriates were subject to harassment, causing widespread fear amongst Syrians in Lebanon and discouraging their otherwise steady influx into their neighbouring country (see Chapter 2.1.3). Maya said 'as a Syrian in Lebanon I faced many problems with my Syrian identity and so in order to free myself from this conflict, I found Syrians online'.

Although she had some shortcomings in the English language, she began to write a blog in English. She explained in an interview that this was because most Syrian bloggers at the time were writing in English. When she returned to Damascus after her studies in Beirut, she wanted to make the blog relevant to her new living circumstances. So she changed her blog name to 'Decentring Damascus' and began to write primarily on Syrian social issues. In 2007, she also opened another blog called 3arabiyyat[114] [meaning 'Arabs' in the feminine plural] this time writing in Arabic. At that time, the number of Syrian bloggers had increased from the small set of expatriate writers and they were almost all writing in Arabic. Maya said in an interview that she switched to Arabic in order ' to reach a wider Syrian audience that lived in Syria'. Her focus also shifted from general social issues to human rights causes and gay and lesbian rights in particular. In the interview she described what she writes on her new blog as 'anarchism and queerness'. Her blog had always been anonymous but in 2007, she decided to write under her real name, Maya.

The cases of Firas and Maya illustrate that blogging is set in relation to a number of factors that change over time. These include: changes in personal circumstances (such as new place to live); dominant practices in the blogosphere (such as language used in Maya's case); and external events. It is often a combination of factors that compel one to blog begin blogging (or stop), and at different junctures, especially in times of crisis, one motivation could outweigh another.

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[114] http://3arabiyyat.blogspot.com/. The '3' is used to signify an Arabic phoneme that has no direct equivalent in Latin script.

6. 3 How Bloggers Blog

Whilst, as discussed in the previous section, *why* blogger's blog (motivations) is shifting and relational to a diversity of factors such as external events, personal events and dominant practices within the blogosphere, the case studies above also alluded to shifts in *how* bloggers blog, such as the choice of language used. Both the languages that Firas and Maya blogged in had changed during their activities. These changes occurred due to responses to the dominant language practices within the blogosphere (Maya's case) or personal preferences (linguistic skills) in Firas's case. The section below reviews the languages practised in Lebanon and Syria and how they came to form more than language per se, but also tools for categorisation.

6.3.1 Changing language choices

When Syrian and Lebanese bloggers began to blog in 2004, they did so in English. According to the survey (Taki, 2005) that was sent to Syrian, Lebanese and Jordanian bloggers in 2005, only four bloggers (N=91) at the time wrote in Arabic alone. The findings of the 2008 questionnaire suggested that blogging in English was still the dominant practice in Lebanon but not in Syria.

Table 6.4 – Language blogged in (Lebanese origin)

Language (Lebanon)	Frequency	Percent
Colloquial Arabic	4	13.8
English	12	41.4
French	1	3.4
Arabic / English	5	17.2
English / French	5	17.2
Arab / Eng / French	1	3.4
Standard Arabic / Eng / French	1	3.4
Total	29	100.0

In Lebanon, only four bloggers (N=29) stated that they blogged in standard Arabic and seven said they blogged in a combination of Arabic and English or French (see Table 5.8). The remainder of respondents (N=29) stated that they blogged in English or French. Those who did not blog in Arabic were further asked in the questionnaire

to state their reason for blogging in another language. The majority chose the category 'It is the language I feel more comfortable writing in'. Some further explained in the 'other' comment box: 'I don't think in Arabic', 'It depends on the mood', 'sometimes it's easier to express some things in English'.

Similarly, out of the twelve bloggers interviewed face to face in Lebanon, eight said they blogged in English, two in a combination of English and Arabic, one in French and one in a both English and French. The high prevalence of the use of a foreign language amongst Lebanese bloggers reflects the schooling system in Lebanon that places emphasis on foreign languages. From the earliest years, all private and public schools teach students in a foreign language (French or English) along with Arabic. Moreover, instruction in either English or French is mandatory for all scientific subjects. Similarly all prestigious private universities in Lebanon instruct in English or French[115]. Therefore those blogging in English or French are not necessarily expatriate bloggers or communicating with an international audience but are simply the product of the bi-lingual schooling that Lebanese receive as Ward(2007) argues.

Writing in English can also be attributed to the fact that many bloggers may be communicating to an international audience. While the most picked category for why they blog in a language other than Arabic in both Syria and Lebanon was "I feel more comfortable in that language", eight respondents to the survey in Lebanon (N=29) also said they blogged in a language other than Arabic because " It is a language that will gather a wider readership from all over the world". Meanwhile only one respondent in Syria (N=37) said so.

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[115] American University of Beirut (English), Université Saint-Joseph (French), Lebanese American University (English), Notre Dame University (French) and Ballamand University (English).

Table 6.5 – Please state reason why you blog in a language other than Arabic

Option	Frequency
It is the language I feel most comfortable writing in	
Lebanon	18
Syria	8
I want my blog to have international viewership	
Lebanon	7
Syria	1
It is the international language of today	
Lebanon	8
Syria	1
Most available sources are in that language	
Lebanon	2
Syria	1
It is easier and more accessible than Arabic	
Lebanon	4
Syria	1

The first bloggers in the Arab world that gained international coverage and brought the trend of blogging to the region were Salam Pax[116] and Baghdad Burning[117] in 2004-2005. These bloggers wrote in English, received international fame and went on to publish books or write for top international newspapers (see Chapter 5.2). In general English language blogs of Arab bloggers receive greater coverage and international audiences especially in times of war or turmoil. Their blog entries are often sourced by the press to get quotes from 'ordinary' people. Ghassan (LB9) said in an interview:

> I blog whenever there is a crisis, definitely, then you have something to say…I wrote a lot during the war and especially on my English blog …

During the Lebanese war, bloggers' campaigns and writing received the attention they did because they were mostly blogging in English. Indeed, over half of Lebanese bloggers interviewed (LB2, LB3, LB4, LB6, LB8, LB9, LB10) had been

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[116] dear_raed.blogspot,com
[117] riverbendblog.blogspot.com

either contacted by international media during the war directly, or had had one of their writings published[118].

In Syria blogging also began with the English language bloggers. Syrian bloggers interviewed who had begun to blog before 2007 found that joining in required one to blog in English. Maya (SB1) said that when she first opened a blog in 2006 she wrote in English because:

> I wouldn't have had an audience and they would have thought I was strange for blogging in Arabic. When I first entered the blogosphere, I was rejected because I was new and my English was not great …they were the elite bloggers and only one was writing in Arabic. Now loads write in Arabic. Ayman[119] who is considered to be the blog father used to write in English and now he writes in Arabic.

A Syrian blogger who answered the survey stated '[I blog in English] because English was already the language being used for existing discussions when I joined the blogosphere...'. The questionnaire findings, however, suggest that the majority of bloggers as of 2008 were blogging in Arabic. Indeed, only five bloggers (N=37) in Syria stated that they write in English on their blog in 2008.

Table 6.6 – Language blogged in (Syrian origin)

Language (Lebanon)	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Colloquial Arabic	13	35.1	35.1
English	5	13.5	13.5
Colloquial & Standard Arabic	9	24.3	24.3
Arabic / English	6	16.2	16.2
Colloquial Arabic / English	4	10.8	10.8
Total	37	100.0	100.0

The statistics that Al Mudawen, the Syrian blog aggregator, devises also confirm the same findings. As of February 2010, approximately 73% of Syrian bloggers

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[118] This is indicative that many of the bloggers interviewed were very active during the war but also that in 2006, the number of bloggers was still less than 200 (as counted on the list of the aggregator) so the spotlight was on less bloggers.
[119] Ayman Haykal is allegedly the first Syrian inside Syria to blog. He initiated Syria Planet, the first blog aggregator in Syria. See Chapter 5. 3.1

aggregated on Al Mudawen wrote in Arabic[120] and about 70% of all bloggers were inside Syria. The rise in the number of bloggers writing in Arabic is due to the new entrants into blogging coming from inside Syria.

Yet not all those blogging in English are abroad. Maya (SB1) explains that 'bloggers who write in English are not all those living abroad but it also signals they went to private schools'. Syria has very few private schools and universities, as they were not allowed to run until 2001 [121]. There are no public statistics on the number of private schools currently running in Syria. However, a media studies professor[122] at the University of Damascus told me that they do not account for more than 5% of public schools and universities. The Syrian education system in contrast to the Lebanese puts a lot of stress on the Arabic language and all subjects, including the sciences, are taught in Arabic. Syria since the 1960's been seen as the heart of Arab nationalism and Syrians take pride in the language[123]. A teacher at an English language private university remarked in an article on private schools in Syria that "[English] Language training is one of our biggest challenges. Syrians used to be known for their language skills, but the nationalization of foreign schools in the 1960s and the Arabisation of the curriculum wiped this out" (Landis, 2007).

As one respondent to the questionnaire commented 'I feel ashamed if I don't write in Arabic. We Arabs will be very far from each other (sic) if we are too easy [nonchalant] about using the classic Arabic language'. Hasan (SB2) also thought that writing in Arabic is necessary. He said 'I have a problem with those that do not write in Arabic. Some say it's because they want to practice their English or they are not

120 Syrian blog aggregator statistics on February 2010. [http://www.almudawen.net/ar/stats]. It is important to note however, that the older blog aggregator Syria Planet aggregates many English language blogs which may not necessarily have applied to be aggregated under Al Mudawen.
121 Legislative decree number 36 dated 2001. Obtained from the Ministry of education website http://www.mhe.gov.sy/new/index.php?page=show&ex=2&dir=docs&lang=2&ser=1&cat=1176&ref=home.
122 Information gathered from Dr Arabi al Masri, Media studies teacher at both the Journalism faculties of Damascus University and Syrian International Academy for Training and Development. Meeting took place on January 15, 2010 during a BBC WST related work trip.
123 I was often interviewing bloggers during fieldwork and meeting with media practitioners in the subsequent BBC trips to Lebanon and Syria in the duration of the same week. The first thing one can spot in meetings and during interviews is the different ways that the Lebanese and Syrians expressed themselves. The Syrians tended to use a mixture of colloquial and standard Arabic in conversations; when the topic of conversation is informal, they used colloquial and when it became more formal they would insert standard Arabic to it. The Lebanese we were meeting with on the other hand would use a mixture of colloquial with English and French in both formal and informal settings. I could not find any literature on this phenomenon.

comfortable with Arabic. But I say they should try. This is the language we all talk and we live here so why not write in that language'.

Whereas early bloggers wrote in English due to the majority's residence in the diaspora, or as a product of the private schooling system that places emphasis on foreign languages, the language variations later came to signal not only language per se or a certain social class status but also other cultural and political categorizations projected onto them. The tightly knit grouping of Syrian bloggers shows a rift between the English language and Arabic language bloggers. Sami (SB6) told me in an interview: 'the English language blogs and Arabic language blogs do not link to each other….maybe because the English language ones are diasporic and thus like to link to others like them'.

The split between the two was highlighted in 2009 when a debate took place amongst Syrian bloggers on the issue of hacking 'immoral' blogs. A blogger called Ahmad Eldibli[124] wrote a post[125] calling for hackers to get in contact with him so they can destroy all Syrian blogs and forums they deemed 'immoral'. The debate was almost exclusive to the Arabic language bloggers. However, Maya (SB1) who had shifted from writing in English to Arabic picked up the debate and blogged about it. She felt especially targeted since she often writes on human rights and homosexuality and used this event to draw a comparison between the English language bloggers and the Arabic bloggers in Syria. She wrote on her blog [Ar][126]:

> Finally, I would like to say, frankly, that the world of Arabic bloggers in Syria suffers from problems that I can't see in the expatriate Syrian blogging scene. I have read English-written Syrian blogs (diaspora blogging) for three years, and even though I moved to blogging in Arabic because I felt myself a stranger to both the diaspora and local blogging, I have not read a single blog from Syrian expatriates that advocated such a 'dismissive logic' before…..which begs the following question: What does it mean to have the first blog that calls for the dismissal of its fellow Syrian blogs a local, Arabic blog with a religious narrative?(ibid)

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[124] http://ahmadedilbi.wordpress.com/
[125] http://ahmadedilbi.wordpress.com/2008/09/18/hackers/
[126] translated by global voices: http://globalvoicesonline.org/2008/11/24/syria-a-blogsphere-divided/

Abu Fares[127], remarked on his blog, about the issue of language differences in the Syrian blogosphere[128]:

> The Syrian blogging movement had started as a secular/liberal outcry in the face of political totalitarianism. The early writings addressed individual freedom and liberty, attacked the unilateral decision making process of the political establishment in Syria and advanced pluralism. Generally speaking, they were mostly written in English. The recent trend, mostly expressed in Arabic, is best characterized as a sweeping current of religious zealotry. These newcomers may or may not openly oppose the political establishment but they share the common vision/dream of Islamic Revival to right what is presently wrong in this country and the rest of the world."

In return Ayman Haykal, who also used to blog in English and shifted to Arabic, wrote a post[129] in Arabic on his blog as a response to the discussions taking place. He said[130]

> This discussion has brought about too much labelling between the "secular" and the "religious". It is crude to attach such labels to a diversity of different bloggers depending on the language they blog. Many Arabic writing bloggers are moderate and open to other views and enrich the Syrian blogosphere with their contributions. Some bloggers have committed a big mistake when they fell into the trap of generalizations during this last controversy in the blogosphere.

Yet even in Lebanon, the language one blogs in often denotes the style of blogging they have and a particular political viewpoint. Bachir (LB3), a Lebanese blogger, remarked:

> There is not much interaction between Arabic and English blogs in Lebanon. The Arabic ones are very few but are generally two types: the ones who write literature or poetry. Or the ones who are ideologically left like the March 8 opposition, Arab nationalists or Marxists…

Very few studies have looked at language and attitudes in Lebanon and Syria[131]. Some studies have shown that borrowing from other languages is linked to a prestige

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[127] http://www.abufares.net/
[128] http://globalvoicesonline.org/2008/11/24/syria-a-blogsphere-divided/
[129] http://www.damasceneblog.com/arabic/2008/11/%D8%
[130] Translated by myself.

factor or associated with social rank (see for example Campbell 1999). However no studies were found which have been concerned with Arabic as a national language and its relation to European languages used in the same countries. Yet in Lebanon, for example, the use of standard Arabic in speech can denote political ideologies such as Arab nationalism.

Indeed, the choice of language can indicate a target audience, a belonging to a grouping (depending on who is blogging) or an ideological choice ingrained in the specificities of the local understandings of what the language represents. While certain practices may dominate at a certain time, it seems that new entrants to blogging may contest these and begin to develop their own practices.

6.3.2 How bloggers understand anonymity

The question of whether to reveal a full name or be anonymous was often brought up in the interviews with bloggers, who often felt the need to justify why they had a pseudonym. Their choice on whether to disclose their identity varied significantly and was usually dependent on not only their motivations for blogging, but also on the meaning that anonymity had acquired within the groups of bloggers they socialise with. Many of the assumptions commonly held on anonymity - such as those relating to identity play - did not come up in the interviews.

As discussed in Chapter 2, literature often regarded anonymity as essentially empowering because it allowed people to traverse their identity markers (Turkle, 1995, Poster, 1990, Rheingold, 1993, Stone, 1996). Others proposed that because of the lack of physical cues to judge each other with online, such as race and gender, it was egalitarian (Poster, 1990, Shaw 199). However, the earlier accounts that had focussed on chatrooms, newsgroups, or MUDs (multi-user domains) "were seen to be representative of all online communication" (Wynn and Katz, 1997: 316). Different platforms acquire different methods of socialisation online and empirical work on more recent online communication platforms such blogs, Facebook, Myspace has concluded that people in general strive for online representations that

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[131] See Nader (1962) the only study found on the use of foreign languages in Arabic speaking countries.

are very similar to their offline selves and call for the bridging of the online/offline, real/virtual dichotomies (Miller & Slater, 2000, Hine, 2000, Valentine & Holloway, 2002, Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006).

Wyn and Katz (1997: 324) found in their study of Homepage creation, that there is an effort on the part of authors to "pull together a more cohesive presentation of self across eclectic social contexts in which individuals participate". Studies on blogging have also found that a clear majority of bloggers make themselves identifiable. For example Schmidt (2007: 12) who conducted a study on the German blogosphere, found that the benefits for bloggers of revealing their identity and thus giving additional context to their postings and comments seem to outweigh the potential risks that come from showing one's identity, such as possible implications on their professional lives. Herring, Scheidt et al. (2005), in their study which is based on content analysis of 203 blogs, show that 67.6% of bloggers include either the first or full name of the author, and 54 % provide other forms of explicit personal information such as age, occupation or geographic location. A longitudinal analysis conducted by Herring, Scheidt et al. (2006) shows that the share of anonymous or pseudonymous blogs decreased to less than 20 percent between 2003 and 2004.

In Syria, contrary to popular belief that everyone is blogging under a pseudonym to avoid persecution, only nine of the 36 respondents to the survey in 2008 claim that they are anonymous. Another three of the respondents had one anonymous blog and another blog with their real name. In response to further probing into why they were anonymous or under a pseudonym, only two in the survey said that it is because they fear government repression.

Indeed, while some bloggers may find that a pseudonym would add an additional layer of protection, Syrian bloggers in interviews were aware that the freedom they are granted depends on their offline position in society and on the content of what they write. Sami (SB6) explains why he is not anonymous stating

> To be honest I saw Maya had her real name and I thought yes why not. And really the 'red lines' in Syria are very clear. While they are not always stable but you have a safety margin. If you don't cross it, you're safe.

As of 2010, no Syrians had been arrested exclusively for their online writing. Tareq Biassi had been imprisoned for his writing online mainly because of his offline affiliations to the opposition and his father's political history (Standish, 2009). Waed al-Mhana is on trial for charges related to an article posted on Kuluna Shuraka (We are all partners), a Syrian website, on November 29, 2006, in which he criticized a decision of the Ministry of Culture to destroy an old market, al-Suk Al-Atiq, in the historic district of Old Damascus[132]. Yet al-Mhana is a long time journalist and activist for protection of endangered archaeological sites. The only wordpress blog to be shut down belonged to Akram (SB10), also the son of an exiled opposition member.

This does not mean that bloggers feel safe online, but rather that a pseudonym will not necessarily protect them, pushing them to opt to self-censor (see Chapter 4.2.3 on self-censorship). Most Syrians are fairly well aware of what issues they should not cover and how to go about phrasing certain sensitive subjects. Freeman (SB2) says that even under a pseudonym he is not sure whether he is 100% safe. He says:

> You never know who is going to read and who it's going to annoy. So while you may avoid certain subjects, you still never know. Even with a pseudonym. I'm sure they can find out who I'm if they really want to.

Akram (SB10) explains in an interview that he thinks all bloggers self-censor, stating:

> Even those Syrian bloggers abroad...well they come in and out of Syria. Even those bloggers self-censor because they know they will be going back to Syria at some point.

Moreover, anonymity online in Syria is technically illegal. The government issued a decree in 2007 that stipulated the illegality of not only anonymity online but also anonymous comments (see Chapter 4). According to the survey in 2008, more bloggers in Lebanon went under a pseudonym than those in Syria with just under

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[132] http://cpj.org/2009/04/syrian-journalist-held-incommunicado-another-on-tr.php

half of all bloggers stating that they were anonymous online. Meanwhile in Syria the majority 24 (N=37) were not anonymous.

Table 6.7 – Are you anonymous?

Anonymity	Syria Frequency	Syria Percent	Lebanon Frequency	Lebanon Percent
No / Yes	3	8.1	2	6.9
No	24	64.9	15	51.7
Yes	9	24.3	12	41.4
Total	36	97.3	29	100
Missing	1	2.7	0	0
Total	37	100.0	29	100.0

In both Lebanon and Syria, the bloggers in the survey who said they were anonymous chose the two categories "I don't want my immediate surroundings to know about my blog" and "1 feel more free if people don't know who I am (because.......)" to explain why they were anonymous.

Table 6.8 – Why are you anonymous?

Option	Lebanon	Syria
I don't feel safe because I'm afraid of repression from government	2	2
I don't want my immediate surroundings to know about my blog	5	4
I do not want to be judged for the content of my blog	2	2
I do not want to be categorized	4	4
I feel more free if people don't know who I am (because....)	5	6
I haven't given it much thought / because I can be	4	1

Two of the comments received in the blank space in Lebanon said that they chose to be anonymous in order not to be categorised or judged. One bloggers left the comment "I'm anonymous because then there are no pre judgments and no post judgements". Indeed, first names and surnames can indicate your religion, ethnicity, region and consequently your assumed political affiliation. We should be aware of the power of identity politics, especially in places like Lebanon where it is used to mobilise people as a basis for new social distinctions. So it makes sense that people

in Lebanon, a country divided by sectarian rivalries, will be more sensitive towards putting their real name on the blog than those in Syria.

Two bloggers from Lebanon also brought to attention that political repression may come from non-state forces. While the Lebanese are generally free of state media control and enjoy relatively liberal press laws, voicing strong opinions about different factions within the country in certain conflicts can nevertheless be dangerous. One Lebanese blogger, Kamal, commented in the 'other' section of the survey, 'I'm openly anti-religious and anti-Hezbollah, and they have an armed presence in the streets. The state cannot protect me adequately'. Another blogger in Lebanon also noted 'repression not only from government but all political parties…'.

The same blogger, Kamal (LB11), was interviewed in January 2009. He explained that when he wrote during the 2006 war, he was against Hezbollah and was receiving a lot of Israeli visitors and commentators. As he works for a press office, the office asked him to stop writing to avoid any problems. Following this incident, he said 'I first closed down my blog, then I thought what the hell and put it back but removed all the personal stuff that could indicate my identity'.

Similarly the repercussions of personal expression on the professional commitments of some bloggers led them to be anonymous online. One of the interviewees, Ghassan (LB9) says he remains anonymous in order to 'escape his immediate surroundings, as well as his friends and family'. He only shares his blog with the blogging world because he meets a lot of 'officials' in his line of work and the blog is where he can 'make fun of them' without being judged for it. Other comments with a similar theme in the 'other' section of the survey were:

'To avoid mixing personal and professional lives'

'It started because I was blogging on politics while I was in the army, and that in itself could be an issue. Then it stayed that way'.

'I have not much to hide; being anonymous is more a matter of managing my privacy'

6.3.2.1 Anonymity and credibility

A theme that was articulated by the Lebanese and Syrian bloggers is the association of having one's real name with credibility. Ramzi (LB5), who teaches at the American University of Beirut, said that he puts his full name and a picture of himself on the blog because 'it provides the reader with context and more credibility". Similarly this theme was also considered amongst those who use blogs to showcase work. Lina (LB2) said that she did not give a single thought to putting her full name as her blog is mostly to showcase her art work. Sarah (LB10) states that she not only has her name on her blog but also her email address. She explains:

> I don't like blogs that who don't have their names. There are many Lebanese bloggers who don't put their real name. It is important to provide your real name when your blog is based around a country and you are blogging from there. If I had been born and raised in Lebanon, my outlook would have been different. So I should tell bloggers that [I'm a Lebanese] who grew up in the States. It's more honest.

In Syria, almost all bloggers (n=21) who were not anonymous stated in the survey that it was because it gave the blog more credibility. In fact this theme seemed to be more prevalent in Syria than in Lebanon. Many of the bloggers I interviewed in March 2008, during the first fieldwork session, explained in the interview that they had been anonymous when they first started blogging but then decided to include their real name afterwards (for example SB2, SB4, SB8,).

One blogger interviewed (SB1) decided to remain anonymous on one blog but to open a second blog with his real name on it. All comments left in the survey from those in Syria who were not anonymous focused on different themes associated with credibility. They included the comments:

> 'Because revolution ideas does not have hidden paths... it encourages other people to speak up'

> 'Trust'

'In true debate, transparency is important. Credibility is not measurable accurately under anonymity. Sharing one's identity does create problems sometimes with people who are intolerant. However, the risks are worth it because, ultimately, ideas are a reflection of the people sharing them and knowing something about the person puts things in perspective and makes the interaction more human and somewhat personal. It helps create community and brings people closer together'.

Scannell writes, "Sincerity is a form of self-display without concealment, for concealment is a kind of dissembling in which possibly disreputable motives are disguised (1992: 59). Standish (2007), who content-analysed discussions in the Syrian blogosphere in 2007 for her BA dissertation, said that anonymity is regarded as uncourageous in Syria. In one of the debates raised that she analysed, Syrians bloggers had a discussion on whether the Syrian blogosphere could bring about political changes. Omar Mushaweh writes in the *Shabalak* (2008) article on Syrian bloggers that[133], "whoever wants to create something in this life and leave a positive footprint must be courageous and show his identity".

During the second fieldwork session, bloggers in Syria explained their stance on the issue when asked why many bloggers were now choosing to write their real name. Many associated disclosing a real name with taking blogging seriously. Omar (SB3) a Syrian blogger said that, although he began blogging anonymously, he later began to put his real name. He explained, 'well I saw that others were doing it and the red lines are very clear…it seems more credible that way".

6.3.2.2 Ambiguity of anonymity

Some bloggers did not give anonymity much thought and while acknowledging that their blogs were public, still felt they enjoyed a degree of privacy on it. Samir (LB4) for example, said 'I'm not anonymous. I have nothing to hide. Even though I do criticize some politicians…. well I just don't think they care so much about what I'm writing'.

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[133] Translated by myself

Maya (SB1) writes her full name on her blog because she finds it more credible, she states, 'I chose not to be anonymous any more, well it's more credible and I'm pretty careless. It has nothing to do with courage'. Yet Maya still feels a degree of privacy on her blog. When asked if her parents read her blog and if they accept her type of writing, she said 'my father once googled me and read a post I wrote but it was on politics and not about homosexuality, thank God'. She claimed that she doesn't hide the blog from her family but she also doesn't think they are going to read it. She continued that 'even though my parents are not liberal and we live in Syria but all our family are in Gaza, we don't have the societal pressure that most people have to conform'.

Although she is one of the better known bloggers in Syria[134] and has been interviewed by international media such as Al Jazeera, she refuses to speak to the local Syrian media. She explains in the interview, I'm afraid of the 'security service' watching my every move as a consequence of coverage by Syrian media'. In this case she assumes a boundedness to her imagined audience, even though, technically speaking, anyone could read her blog, including her family and the Syrian press. Wyn and Katz (319) found in their study of Homepage owners that authors seemed to perceive a more private world of readers than a limitless audience. The private world they perceived was often conterminous with the people they socialize with online.

Kennedy (2006: 866) argues in her empirical study of webpage authors that some of her subjects had stated that they were anonymous on the Internet because they didn't have their full names disclosed, but at the same time they would post pictures of themselves on their sites. She states that there is a distinction between *being* anonymous and *feeling* anonymous and that there are different degrees of anonymity that mean different things to different people (ibid).

The interviews with bloggers in Lebanon and Syria revealed a similar ambiguity with regards to anonymity. It is evident that 'anonymity' is not a 'reveal all' or 'reveal

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[134] The Syrian bloggers I interviewed all mentioned Maya's blog. Perhaps because she is one of the few female bloggers and she writes about controversial subjects (homosexuality). She has also been interviewed by Al Jazeera several times. See for example the clip of an interview on Al Jazeera (*Hadeeth Al Sabah*, 2008)

nothing' strategy. Those who are anonymous disclose their identity to other bloggers or the community of bloggers. Kamal (LB11), the Lebanese blogger who removed his name and any revealing details on his blog during the war says that he is very careful not to reveal his identity online as it may jeopardize his job and his personal safety. Yet, when asked if he knows other Lebanese bloggers from the online world, he says: 'yes I reveal my identity to certain bloggers and I have attended some offline meetings. I don't know, there is a level of trust between bloggers even if they oppose your views'. Akram (SB10), the Syrian blogger who is in exile in Lebanon, also said:

> Anonymity does not work so well inside the blogosphere…no one really stays anonymous for a long time. After a while, they give you their email and we may interact through chat. Then you get to know 'who' that that person is.

Indeed, most bloggers get to know other bloggers and continue blog discussions in other forms of media such as email, instant messenger, telephone and in face-to-face encounters. They know that their online activities have consequences and possibilities that are very real. Zeina (LB8) is anonymous on her blog but has attended most of the early blogger' meetings offline. Aloush who goes by a pseudonym said in an article in *Shabablik* (2008: 5): 'most bloggers may not declare their full name directly but they reveal enough information that their identity is not difficult to know'. Similarly, anonymous Lebanese blogger, Ghassan (LB9), does not share his blog with his immediate surroundings, yet he is a very active blogger who attends most of the offline meetings and has formed friendships with a number of other bloggers.

6.4 Conclusion

The first part of this Chapter looked at 'who is blogging' in Lebanon and Syria and compared the demographic findings of the questionnaire in 2008 to research conducted in other contexts. The demographics of bloggers across different contexts revealed similar findings - in that more males blogged than females, bloggers are generally young, and well educated. This shows that there are certain barriers to entry to the blogosphere. However, this static snapshot in time does not account for the rapid changes occurring in 'who' is blogging. Moreover, demographic statistics alone only show gaps in statuses such as gender, class and religion and do not reveal why a technology is made meaningful to some people and not to others. To blog involves a propensity to 'speak' about 'something' to an audience. If we can ascertain why the activity of blogging is made relevant to different bloggers in different periods of time, we can account for what kind of skills and habits people need to have access to the activity, rather than assume that all demographic gaps should/or will eventually be closing.

The second part of the chapter problematises a-contexual categorisations of why people blog. In the interviews and survey, bloggers gave abstract reasons for why they blog such as "I want to be read". It is important to go beyond these articulations and find out the factors that compel them *to want* to be read. Wanting to be read is a valid motivation for blogging but without contextualising it within the social, political and cultural worlds they live in and the spaces they manoeuvre in, we cannot arrive at an accurate picture of why bloggers blog.

The findings suggest that motivations are not clear-cut or static. It is often a combination of factors that compel one to begin blogging or stop, and at different times one motivation could outweigh another (especially in times of crisis). These motivations are changing depending on a number of factors that include: changes in the individual circumstances of the blogger, such as moving home. Political and social events also influence why bloggers blog, what they blog about and what they do with blogging. This is exemplified in how Lebanese bloggers all took to writing about the war and the subsequent political events, although they may have been blogging on a purely artistic blog in essence, or even a photo blog or personal one.

Moreover, there are certain ideas about blogging practices that are dominant amongst bloggers who socialise with each other. New bloggers often discover that the activity of blogging has pre-established and taken for granted structures of both meaning and power. In this regard bloggers may shift or reassess their positions on how to blog in accordance with these meanings. Therefore they may continue blogging (or stop) for reasons different from those that led them to begin doing so in the initial phase. For example, blogging in English was crucial for those wanting to socialise with other Syrian bloggers online in 2005, as they were for the most part all blogging in that language[135]. With the proliferation of Arabic bloggers over time, blogging in English was no longer required and those blogging in that language were generally seen as liberal and living abroad. Thus there are differing and changing meanings to the activity of blogging that bloggers will also react to and that may change why the blog.

The last section finds that just as language has taken on certain meanings within the practices of bloggers, anonymity has also come to be understood in diverse ways. Whilst literature on the Internet has suggested that anonymity allows Internet users to escape from the boundaries imposed on them, the majority of bloggers interviewed and surveyed in Syria were not anonymous. Syrian bloggers in interviews were aware that the freedom they are granted depends on their offline position in society and on the content of what they write. They would rather self-censor and disclose their real name, as the general understanding is that real names add credibility to their writing.

While the Lebanese do not have the same impositions and censorship that the Syrians do, many bloggers remained anonymous. Indeed, full names in Lebanon can indicate one's religion and consequently their assumed political affiliation. Many bloggers in Lebanon said they remain anonymous in order not to be categorised. Yet those who do not disclose their real name may reveal other identity markers on their blogs, such as geographic location, personal interests and political views. It is clear

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[135] However, if a Syrian blogger's English is not good enough, they wouldn't have had the choice to blog in that language in the first place. The positions that bloggers take are necessarily bound by the blogger's habitus.

that anonymity is not always an absolute 'reveal all' or 'reveal nothing' strategy. One may want to reveal and conceal certain aspects of their identity to certain people and hide others – just as we do in face-to-face interaction. Indeed, the findings suggest that bloggers, whether anonymous or not, often reveal who they are to other bloggers – continuing conversation in other forms of communication such as email, instant messengers or face to face. The extent of bloggers' socialization and interaction with other bloggers and its boundaries will be explored in the next chapter.

Chapter VII – The 'Other' Online – Interaction and the Audience

The findings of Chapters 5 and 6 depicted bloggers often referring to and defining the activities of other bloggers, as well as responding to themes raised by them within their own country. Debates regarding the issue of hacking immoral blogs in Syria were one example. Chapter 6 also showed that there are dominant ideas that bloggers have referred to about the practice of blogging that operate within different groups of bloggers who socialise with each other, such as the association in Syria between disclosing one's name and credibility. While the concept of 'community' has been used by academics to describe socialization on the Internet, most studies have focused on observable online interactions rather than wider (and often unobservable) dynamics at play within different groups of bloggers. Bloggers' interactions with each other do not necessarily mean they form a community - with all its normative undertones - but that also does not mean there is nothing there. This chapter will therefore discuss the nature of interaction on blogs, what its boundaries are and how bloggers conceive of their audiences.

7.1 The 'Nation' and Locality

While the online world has often been conceptualised as separate from the offline with geographic boundaries made redundant, yet the findings of this thesis suggest that many bloggers from Lebanon and Syria are interacting mostly with others from their local country. Perceptions and generalisations expressed in interviews by Lebanese and Syrian bloggers show that in 2008 bloggers felt knowledgeable about and familiar with the activities of bloggers in their respective countries. During interviews, bloggers defined who other bloggers are, what they write about, referred to popular bloggers, examples of 'bad' bloggers and 'good' bloggers, said they met face to face with some bloggers and compared and contrasted their own activities in relation to others in their own country. For example, Lina (LB2) states, 'I'm not like other Lebanese bloggers. I blog about art. Most of *them* blog about politics'. Maya (SB1) says 'most Syrian bloggers write about personal stuff, it's a reflection of how inactive the country is'. Ghassan (LB9) defines Lebanese bloggers as being 'on the

intellectual spectrum of Lebanese society and blogging gives them a medium to show off on'. Bachir (LB3) writes about 'a state of tiredness in the Lebanese blogosphere after the war'. The reference by Lebanese and Syrian bloggers to a 'blogosphere' as such, does not mean one exists unproblematically, but it indicates that there is a certain dynamic there that has shifting peripheries and was at that point in time somewhat demarcated by national boundaries.

The Berkman Centre for Internet & Society (Etling et al. 2009) found that the Arabic blogosphere is organized primarily around countries but that the make-up of each national blogosphere is diverse. According to the study, there are a series of national blogospheres rather than an 'Arab blogosphere' aggregated under initiatives on the part of bloggers themselves. Aggregators (such as Saudi Blogs, Jordan Planet, Kuwait's Safat, Bahrain Blogs and the Syrian Al Mudawen) adopt the national mode, as does Global Voices Online[136] (ibid). Indeed, when one browses through the names of blogs on the Syrian or Lebanese aggregator forums, a stress on the locality in which they emerge from is evident. Names such as 'Damascene blog', 'Allepo post', 'a Syrian dude', 'Beirutius', 'Beirut under siege', are just a few examples of references to locality in the titles of blogs.

When asked in interviews whether they read, linked to or knew of the activities of Lebanese bloggers or vice versa[137], only Maya (SB1), a Syrian blogger who had lived in Lebanon for a short duration, said she did so. The rest of the interviewees said they hardly visited their neighbouring country's blogs. Firas (LB6) a Lebanese blogger writing in Arabic said 'I don't really read Syrian blogs. I've come across a few random Egyptian ones'. Akram (SB10) a Syrian blogger in exile in Lebanon said that 'Lebanese and Syrian blogs are not in contact; we blog for different reasons, they [the Lebanese] mostly blog in English and French'. Similarly Zeina (LB8) said 'there is no interaction between Lebanese and Syrian bloggers because they write in Arabic where here (sic), we write in English or French'. Hasan (SB2) said that 'I may look at Lebanese or Egypian blogs if a topic really moves me to do so, but for now, I'm just interested in the Syrians'. Sary (SB6) said 'I've come across a few

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[136] Global Voices hires volunteers and editors from each country to do a daily round-up of the blogs.
[137] It was not always appropriate to ask out of the blue whether they linked to Syrian bloggers or vice versa. Lebanese and Syrian relations were particularly sensitive during the period of research due to the ejection of Syrian troops from Lebanon following the Cedar Revolution and accompanying debates on how the two countries should associate with each other. See Chapter 2.1.3

Lebanese blogs from Maya's (SB1) links but I never regularly check them'. Omar (SB3) stated 'Lebanese and Syrian bloggers do not interact with each other…'. He explained 'I've always felt a distance to Lebanese bloggers. When blogging was emerging in Syria in 2005, I came across a few of them and I didn't feel comfortable because of how extreme they are. They was a lot of racism against the Syrians!'

Indeed, as some bloggers articulated, the lack of interaction is perhaps due to language preferences that dominate both blogospheres or the political conflicts between Lebanon and Syria. It could also be due to the fact that at the time of research, there were huge disagreements between the Lebanese on how Syria and Lebanon should relate to each other (see Chapter 2.1.3). But perhaps more importantly Lebanese and Syrian bloggers do not read or link to each other's blogs because of the fact that both sides in general are writing about very local concerns that may not be relevant to the lives of the other. Habitus indicates that sets of dispositions vary by location and social trajectory; thus bloggers with different life experiences will have gained varied ways of thnking, feeling and acting which may not be relevant to other bloggers.

DiMaggio et al (2001: 318) in their review of literature relating to online communities find that the Internet, rather than creating new communities, "sustains bonds of [already existing] community by complementing, not replacing, other channels of interaction". Similarly, Miller & Slater found in their study of Internet use in Trinidad, that the global aspect of the Internet has emphasized the local by having people situate themselves in contrast to the other, where they "held on to older senses of self and place in their encounter with a sudden immediate incursion of the 'the global'" (2000: 85). This is not a new phenomenon; studies of old media have made evident the localising effect of telecommunications. The integration of the telephone for example did not end up making distance more familiar but on the contrary went on to strengthen local ties (Matei & Ball-Rokeach 2002: 409, DiMaggio: 2001).

Sakr (1999), writing on satellite television in the Middle East and North Africa, acknowledges that the de-terrestrialization of television enables viewers to escape from the territorial and jurisdictional confines of the country they live in. But her

findings raised questions as to whether satellite television in the Middle East and North Africa is de-territorialized as a consequence of de-terrestrialisation). She found that power relations are not de-territorialized and can be traced to the exercise of political power and access to capital by groups and individuals in these states (1999: 104). Indeed, the boundaries that have been created by nations and the consequent policies, emerging power structures and cultural formations that emerge from it, will allow individuals to act and respond to these structures in specific ways. Thus the consequence of national policy-driven technical and financial accessibility of the blogosphere (as documented in Chapter 4) shows how people's use of a technology is affected by where they live. In so far as nations exist and exercise power over their constituents, then these policies will be very much lived by the people they affect. Indeed, bloggers position themselves in relation to and in contrast to these environments.

Policy and economic decisions made by powerful institutions affect not only the opportunities available for people to use blogging but can also have an effect on how blogging is understood. For example, the Syrian government's decision to confine the Internet to government institutions until 2000 under the justification of 'security', making it the last Arab country to give the public Internet access, has had material repercussions in that the Syrian populace came online later than most of the world and its access up to the present moment is minute. The symbolic meaning of this late introduction and the accompanying banning of user generated sites has had consequences on how Syrians conceive of, and perceive, blogging and what it means for them. Many Syrians stated in interviews that there is a widely held (mis)conception amongst Syrians that those using blogs are doing so for politically transgressive reasons. Hasan (SB2) recounts the reactions he gets when he tells people he knows he has a blog.

> You get people saying 'you have a blog!!!!? What do you write about???? Writing in general is not widespread here. Another thing is the banning of the sites and that of blogspot. All these led to that attitude.

Indeed, wider macro institutional decisions not only shape access to the Internet but also how it is appropriated. As DiMaggio (2001: 327) puts it, 'the social impact of the Internet depends on the impact of society on what the Internet becomes'.

Hine (2000: 108 -113) found in her study of webpages that there was no 'erasure of locality' in the WebPages she was studying but rather a performance of it. She says that the Internet may lead to an increase in cultural reflexivity rather than an erasure of culture. She maintains that whilst in principle there are no boundaries, yet there are performative boundaries that are socially constructed and nations can be spaces of appropriate action for identities. She adds that her case study of newsgroups shows that national identities appeared to be solidified rather than dissolved by the contact (ibid.:114). The play on nation for participants is a 'strategic performance which was brought into being as relevant to the social situations which participants understood themselves as being part of' (Hine, 2000: 114).

7. 2 The Audience and Interaction

We can take for granted that bloggers write on a public platform because they want to be read and recognised – whether by a ubiquitous audience or a small network of friends. Blogs, however, have not only been seen as spaces for public self-expression but as interactive communicative spaces. The very first bloggers were called filter blogs and were generally meant to guide people to pages of interest through links. These links and the commenting system have been seen as one the most important communicative aspects of blogs and what differentiate them from static and non-interactive webpages. Whilst blogging has often been placed under the banner of 'computer-mediated communication' and literature often focuses on its network and interlinked importance, it is debatable how communicative bloggers actually are with each other. The thesis findings suggest that sociability on blogs is very different from sociability as it is often depicted in relation to forms of computer mediated communication studied, such as chat rooms, forums, and MUDs (multi-user domains), that preceded blogs. These spaces were common to all users, whereas blogs are the space of the blogger only. Therefore those who visit the blog can comment on the content written by the blogger but they cannot change it or

participate in it. Although we may see a 'blogroll' and a set of links on the majority of blogs, the findings nevertheless suggest that bloggers do not necessarily engage with those on their blogroll or comment and interact with other bloggers directly.

7.2.1 The Audience

Nardi et al (2004a: 46) state that, although the audience is an integral part of blogging, interactivity on blogs is limited. They liken bloggers' posts to a radio broadcast (ibid, 2004b), saying that 'just as the broadcaster sends messages without interruption and with limited interactivity, listeners or readers in the case of blogs also read messages and then can later comment or call-in'. However, that interaction is very much controlled by the author of the blog itself. Similar to what some studies on mass media production have found, the production of content is, for the most part, envisaged by its producers to be separate from the feedback and interaction of the audience. Paddy Scannell's book *Radio, Television and Modern Life* questions the presence of the audience in the psyche of producers (1996: 12). He observes that 'BBC producers, especially in the arts, drama and documentary departments were under the notion of 'creative autonomy' – that they were making programmes for themselves as 'self expression'. Whilst this later changed as audience figures were readily available, it is left unclear how much the audience is present in the mindset of those producing content of any sort. Bourdieu's work for example also suggests that, particularly at the beginning of their careers, artists are favoured who are "known and recognized by their peers and only by them... and owe their prestige, at least negatively, to the fact that they make no concessions to the demand of the 'general public'" (Bourdieu 1996: 217 cited in Brake 2009: 36). Similarly Hine (2000: 93) examines previous research on mass communication that suggests that producers often orient to one another as an audience for their products, as did webpage designers in her own study.

Because of the way that bloggers understand blogging and how it has been framed as an alternative to the mass media (See Chapter 5), it seems that bloggers find that it is more important to be writing what essentially *they* want to say rather than attempting to reach out to the general public or a mass audience. Firstly, they know that that objective is unattainable and more importantly, due to the discursive characterisation

of blogs, their mission is to tell *my* side, not *everyone's* side of the story. And in so far as blogs do not belong to an institution, the *my* comes to represent the 'ordinary', which is seen to be more authentic and sincere than the 'my' of a journalist within an organisation, or a writer under the demands and constraints of a publishing house. Moreover, due to the disgruntlement felt amongst many of the writers towards what they see as an 'inauthentic' mass media, it would seem that bloggers are more concerned with creating a *critical audience* rather than satisfying a passive and already existing audience. In this regard, their primary concern is to focus more on *what they want to say* as opposed to *what the audience wants*. This is a common theme between Lebanese and Syrian bloggers. Yet how they imagine that critical audience is differently situated in different times of their activities. Many Lebanese bloggers during the war for instance found that they were targeting and reaching more of an international audience. Furthermore, many of them and especially those writing in English were reaching the mass media.

This focus on the individual rather than the audience was made clear in Syria when bloggers differentiated their blogging activities from forums[138] quite explicitly. For example, Anas[139], in marking his fifth year anniversary of blogging, wrote a whole blog post entitled 'Five years of Anas Online- the blogging experience' on why he blogs instead of participating in a forum.

> Why would I want to blog when I can guarantee thousands of already existing audiences on forums? Well because in forums you have to cater to the needs of the forum moderator and it is never exactly what you want. In one forum, your post may not be political enough, in another too political, and in another not liberal enough so that's when I decided to open my open blog and have the freedom I wanted and allow others to comment too.

Indeed, bloggers see their role as an 'alternative' to the mass media and one that is free from constraint. The appraisal of blogging and what sets it apart from the media is the freedom from a gate-keeping process. Bloggers in both Lebanon and Syria spoke of the importance and meaning of this freedom but to varying degrees. In the interviews, it was clear that bloggers felt a certain sense of authority and authorship on the blog and that the readers came second. Ghassan (LB9) says, "I don't need to

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[138] There is no literature as far as I'm aware on the use of forums in Syria.
[139] http://anasonline.net/2010/02

go through anyone. It's Ok I can publish whatever…' Similarly, Bassem (LB1), a PhD student, said 'on blogs there is less of a constraint on structure, how you write, what you write, etc'. Yazan, a Syrian blogger, stresses the importance of expressing individual opinions. He is quoted in *Shabablak* magazine (2007) as saying:

> When I started blogging, the whole area was in a state of fury. Samir Kassir had just been assassinated and there was a tendency amongst everyone to deform the individual and to group individuals into categories, causes, nationalities or ethnicities…so I wanted to talk about myself as an individual with all my affiliations that others may or may not sympathise with…so when I talk about change in Syria, I do so from *my own* perspective and experiences 'as an individual.

Most literature on blogging gives much agency and importance to the role of the audience as an *active* participant. Robinson (2006: 68) for example states that '…blogs use their readers as co-authors and sources...'. However, those who assume that the audience is changing the way that bloggers write and that bloggers see them as an integral part of their activities, do not question the extent of the audience's involvement in the text of the blogger. Lenhart in the preface of her dissertation on blogging asserts: "The blog was a place where I could revel in my own interests and follow my whims. The narrative I chose to tell was the central narrative. Readers were welcomed to come along for the ride but they weren't required to stay…my blog was a site of expression for myself, and a site of conversation with others that was entirely under my control…' (2005: 2).

7.2.2 Interaction

Blogging then is more like a controlled form of production: viewership and feedback, albeit important to some bloggers, remains secondary to production. Therefore, even though blogging may contain interactive elements, it does not necessarily result in interactivity. The findings from bloggers in Lebanon and Syria suggest that bloggers see the audience as integral to their motivation for continuing blogging, yet at the same time, see blogs as their *own* personal space where they are free to write what they want without anyone editing it. The degree of 'autonomy' they felt with regard to their commentators, varied between Lebanese and Syrian bloggers.

Lebanese bloggers seemed to be mostly concerned with improving their writing rather than debating issues with their readers. Indeed very few mentioned that their readers' comments have any influence on what they write or how they write. Most blogs do not get many comments at all. Whilst a majority of blogs offer the opportunity to comment on any entry, Mishne and Glance (2006) have shown that only about 15% of blog postings actually receive comments (cited in Schmidt, 2007a).

Whilst all bloggers want an audience, they do not necessarily spend much time with them. They would rather spend time writing new posts. The findings suggest that they want commentators to comment as a sign that people are reading but not necessarily as a way to engage, interact or debate with the commentators. Ramzi (LB5) a Lebanese blogger, puts it well when he says 'I don't have much time to respond to comments unless a question is being posed…I think it is wasteful and sidelining [to respond] unless someone is correcting me'. Similarly, Samir (LB4) from Lebanon states 'I'd rather spend some time writing a new post rather than correspond with an unknown' and ' I talk to my commentators in a condescending manner, because it is my blog'. Bassem (LB1) says ' I worry about the order of my posts rather than about reading other blogs'. Amin (LB7) said ' I'm a dictator on my blog so I kick [block] out who I want …its my space…'. Similarly, Zeina (LB8), commented 'if people do not like my writing, if they think it is crude, then I tell them not to come'.

This theme was more apparent in interviews with Lebanese bloggers than those of Syrian origin. They displayed a certain confidence, authority and autonomy which was not as evident in interviews with Syrian bloggers. Whilst bloggers in Syria also had a sense of authorship on the blog and, especially in contrast to the stringent over-arching media control they are under, they were less expressive about the degree of autonomy they had and wanted to achieve on their blog and were more prone to answer and respond to those commenting. Maya (SB1) for example states that the audience was one of her biggest motivators for starting a blog. She said:

> It is important to get challenged in the blogopshere through the commenting system in order to improve…in the blogosphere, you have options to select friends. In Syria you have no options, we have no organizations, we meet each other in school …online we meet each other out of interest.

The discrepancy with regard to the interaction with other bloggers between Lebanon and Syria could be attributed to two factors; one is the general dissatisfaction of Lebanese bloggers with the idea of the blogosphere as a collective and alternative space to the media and general divisions in society. The breakdown of that notion was materially seen and felt after the disagreements amongst the large number of contributors to the Lebanese blog aggregator (Lebanon Heart blogs) and its subsequent breakdown. The other is the generally more individualistic and entrepreneurial attitude amongst the Lebanese. The Syrians expressed a desire to communicate with others, despite that fact that they are aware that they are only reaching out to other bloggers and despite the fact they are largely diverse. This is perhaps indicative of a certain preoccupation with the collective entrenched in the Syrian social discourses, by which the interactivity and collaboration on blogs is seen to be serving the common cause. This is also due to the very recent opening up of political and artistic expression in Syria which has given the population a sense of hope. Under the Baathist rule, diversity in expression, opinions, and identities was seen as non-nationalistic and would readily lead to punishment. Whilst most Syrian bloggers interviewed can agree on one issue, and that is a total rejection of the current situation in which they live, they remain divided as to what type of social and political changes should be made. The Syrian blogosphere, as many other blogospheres in the world, is divided by language, ideology and those inside and outside of Syria. Yet the fact that contentious topics such as "the Golan heights", and "homosexuality" are broached, whether in opposition or not, is highly valued in Syria. Considering that groups with a political orientation cannot advertise, publish articles in the domestic press, speak to students or the army and face arrest for holding a meeting of more than five people (Lahn 2006) allows for a blogosphere that is making a difference for merely debating such issues. The flourishing of diverse opinions, whilst extreme is some circumstances, is liberating for bloggers who have never experienced what it means to be diverse and talk and debate about this diversity. Omar (SB3) thinks the stress on Syrian issues is a reaction to the generally passive populace. He says the reason he thinks that Syrian bloggers write about Syrian issues so often is because 'we Syrians do not know who we are and that

is why we write about Syrian things'. Even when there was a debate between Syrian English language blogs and Arabic ones on the hacking of immoral blogs, Maya (SB1), despite being targeted herself, wrote on her blog.

> It is very outrageous for some and for me to hear arguments that are against non-virgin women and homosexuals, but these very thoughts are real, and we need to feel good about having Syrian bloggers who depict the majority of the Syrian society, because without them, we ourselves won't be real anymore, we will think that Syria is fine, everything is fine, and we won't be able to touch a bit of what is not so fine about us.

She talks about the same debate in an interview:

> We [Syrians] are brought up not to be active. We have been taught to care only about our personal issues …the sense of civil duty is very hard for us to be active on… human rights, freedom of speech etc…in Lebanon u go to t-marbouta [a café] and everyone is talking about this. We don't have this here…

Indeed as depicted in Chapter 5, most Syrian bloggers see blogs as giving a venue for a diversity of opinions on social and political subjects, where one is not readily present in the mass media or elsewhere. In Lebanon, differences in opinions are not seen as liberating but a reminder of the split in the general Lebanese populace and one that is widely and readily reflected in the media. Blogs for the Lebanese are just a new space to express these differences rather than create something new.

7.2.3 The Audience as constraining

The role of the audience however, can be constraining. Many bloggers have pointed out that when they have got to know their audience, or who is reading them, they felt a degree of constraint in what they write. This was more apparent in personal bloggers than others. Zeina (LB8), a Lebanese blogger, always had a diary in which she wrote her feelings. In 2005, her friend, a journalist, wrote an article about blogs and encouraged her to open one. She wrote in French under a pseudonym what she describes as 'my innermost feelings'. She describes in an interview:

> At first I was freer in my writing because I didn't know anyone who read me. Little by little, I got to know bloggers so my spontaneity

decreased but I continued to write personal things. Yet there was a point when I got to know some of my readers and they started to comment on my blog with remarks such as 'cheer up' and 'life is not so bad'. This was not the point of my blog and I didn't want to feel constrained, so I opened another blog through which I sought out an audience I didn't know. Unfortunately they [bloggers she knew] found this one too!!!

Marilyn, another Lebanese blogger, had a similar experience. She was one of the 'first generation' of Lebanese bloggers and an administrator of the aggregator Lebanon Heart Blog. She said 'I was anonymous, and I could write anything but now everyone knows me, I couldn't write anything and my blog became so general and cryptic….'. In Syria, Maya (SB1) says that when she got to know bloggers personally, she automatically began to change her writing to suit them, although she didn't want to.

7.3 Conclusion

Bloggers see their blogs as autonomous individual spaces with their main concern being: to tell *my* side of the story. And in so far as blogs do not belong to an institution, the *my* comes to represent the ordinary, which in turn is regarded as more authentic and sincere than the 'my' of a journalist within an organisation, or a writer under the demands and constraints of a publishing house. In this regard, bloggers are more concerned with creating a *critical audience* by focusing on their own individual point of view, as opposed to *what the audience or commentators want*.

There are differences however in how much autonomy Lebanese and Syrian bloggers wanted to achieve on their blogs. This is ingrained in the specificities of the context they live in, the changing entrants to blogging and the consequent changes in the values ascribed to blogging as an activity. The findings suggest that Syrian bloggers hold socialisation on blogs in high regard. All bloggers were born under the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party that has rigorously controlled most of the mass media and did not allow for discussion of contentious issues in public. Thus many find that diversity in opinions on blogs, while often causing rifts, is still valuable in itself. Bloggers often articulated in interviews that it is important to hear these diverse opinions whether they tend to agree with them or not. In this regard, bloggers in Syria will most likely respond to their commentators and collaboratively hold discussions on common subjects, albeit on their individual blogs.

The Lebanese on the other hand see differences in opinions and rifts between bloggers as a reflection of a country divided by sectarian and political rivalries. The war in 2006, and the political divide following it, were materially reflected in the falling out between the contributors of the Lebanese blog aggregator, which was the hub for the bloggers. Lebanese bloggers at the time of the 2008 interviews were dismissive of any kind of unity or collaboration between bloggers. They were more concerned with spending time writing on their own blogs, while feedback and comments were not important to them.

Socialisation between bloggers does not necessarily take the form of observable communication using links and comments. While blogging tools may contain

interactive features, the findings suggest that this does not necessarily result in bloggers using it for interactivity. Yet bloggers still belong to a collective effort, respond to one another and position their activities in relation to other bloggers. For the time being, bloggers are socialising with others within their country. Indeed, the performed boundary of nation was relevant to those in Lebanon and Syria. Since they have shared a history of the emergence of the Internet and are constrained by the same wider structures, albeit in different ways, the tool of blogging was made significant to them in a similar way to those within their own countries. However, this does not mean that Syrian and Lebanese bloggers will continue to socialise primarily with each other on blogs. The boundaries and boundedness of a 'Syrian' or 'Lebanese' national agglomeration is not set and static. The meanings attached to blogging have changed through the course of this research and are likely to continue changing through time. Thus bloggers may or may not continue to find this agglomeration meaningful.

Socialisation between bloggers does not necessarily take the form of observable communication using links and comments. While blogging tools may contain interactive features, the findings suggest that this does not necessarily result in bloggers using it for interactivity. Yet bloggers still belong to a collective effort, respond to one another and position their activities in relation to other bloggers. For the time being, bloggers are socialising with others within their country. Indeed, the performed boundary of nation was relevant to those in Lebanon and Syria. Since they have shared a history of the emergence of the Internet and are constrained by the same wider structures, albeit in different ways, the tool of blogging was made significant to them in a similar way to those within their own countries. However, this does not mean that Syrian and Lebanese bloggers will continue to socialise primarily with each other on blogs. The boundaries and boundedness of a 'Syrian' or 'Lebanese' national agglomeration is not set and static. The meanings attached to blogging have changed through the course of this research and are likely to continue changing through time. Thus bloggers may or may not continue to find this agglomeration meaningful.

Chapter VIII: Conclusion & Reflection

8.1 Relationality

The past six years of studying bloggers and the blogosphere in Lebanon and Syria has produced a complex picture of blogging activity, one that has significantly changed during the research period. I first began to study bloggers in 2004 when I wrote my MA thesis on blogging and democratisation in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. I had sent a survey to bloggers and managed to get a high number of respondents from the three Arab countries (N=91) relative to the number of bloggers existing at the time. Indeed, the Lebanese and Syrian blogospheres at that point were a small cluster of early adopters, tightly knit and with very different perspectives on what blogging means than what is observed today. The study of the blogosphere since its inception in the two countries, and the maintenance of contact with many of the early bloggers who still blog today, and the comparison between the two countries, has allowed me to recognise the relationality of the activity to the many factors surrounding it. This conclusion provides the contribution the thesis makes to the literature, the notion of a Lebanese and Syrian blogosphere as a participants category and reflections on the limitations of the research.

I began the study of bloggers with the approach that "context" matters – a response to the literature and media articles, which, at the time in 2006 and as discussed in Chapters 2 and 5, were largely technologically deterministic. Writing about blogs in the Middle East at that point generally focused on the censorship of blogs by governments and the cases of a small number of bloggers who managed to break taboos or challenge the authorities. Through these examples the literature overwhelmingly constructed the bloggers' activities as counteracting the influences of context, including culture, economy and power structures, because of features that the technology offers, such as anonymity and erasure of geography.

Due to these discourses and assumptions concerning how bloggers should be blogging in the Middle East, bloggers in Syria questioned why I would want to study Syria's relatively small set of bloggers who have not been able to make substantial

changes, pointing out that Egypt is an important place to study. In Lebanon, similarly, bloggers often referred me to the bloggers they deemed 'important', namely political bloggers or blogs belonging to journalists or academics. However, during my fieldwork I was finding something different to the commonly held assumptions; not all bloggers were political and they were not necessary anonymous in authoritarian states, the digital divide is not simply a matter of access and most importantly the Internet was a tool with meanings embedded in it sustained by those who use it. I was also finding the bloggers in one country are diverse but concerned with very local issues, and the meaning of blogging is relational to its context in various ways. I therefore argue that "milieu", "context", "social background" and "location" are important and necessary to understand why and how bloggers blog. All the evidence I gathered showed that bloggers are not virtual beings but very much embedded in their particular location. The boundaries that have been construed between the online and offline are not only problematic but my empirical study suggests they are not real. The online and offline are interrelated and there is continuity between them. What happens in one space is relational to what happens in the other. My methodology has attempted to bridge this constructed border by interviewing bloggers face to face and having them talk me through their online activities and the meanings it has for them, as well as other bloggers' activities, those they link to, those they read and those who read them. So rather than focus on a particular type of blogger, I sought to investigate what the factors are that allowed these diverse meanings to be constructed. I found that that there are wider macro variables and cultural specificities that affect how and why people blog.

Policy decisions made by governments directly influenced the appropriation of the Internet. In both Lebanon and Syria, the Internet's relatively high costs and low speeds are a result of the government's decisions to refrain from investing in infrastructure development, to compete in a commercial market of ISPs and to have a monopoly over bandwidth. Yet while cost and speed have a strong correlation with Internet integration, their effects are never direct. It was demonstrated in Chapter 4 that Lebanon has one of the worst Internet infrastructures and highest access prices in the Arab world yet still achieves a higher rate of integration than the pan-Arab average and has a large number of websites. The Lebanese example is therefore telling in terms of the many influences on Internet use. The measurement of

inequalities in relation to Internet use should not be limited to access alone but should take into account many additional factors that may also encourage or hinder people's use of the Internet.

Offline inequalities regarding income, gender and education directly influenced the adoption of the Internet, making it skewed towards the more privileged. On top of this, however, evidence from Internet café visits, interviews with bloggers, ISPs and those working on Internet development projects, showed that many people see the Internet as a medium of entertainment rather than a tool to better one's chances in life. This attitude stems from a number of factors. One is that valued services such as online banking, e-commerce and interactive websites for companies and public institutions are not generally available in Syria for example. An additional obstacle lies in the fact that Arabic content is scarce and thus there is a lower selection of sources on the Internet. But there is more to this lack of content than is often recognised. In fact, in both Lebanon and Syria the Internet has not been fully integrated into the educational curriculum and teachers may themselves not know how to use the Internet. Since many people learn how to use the Internet from peers, it comes to be seen as a 'luxury' and 'a waste of time' rather than a necessity.

Censorship, one of the most often reported obstacles to the Internet, is an important impediment to accessing certain websites. Yet the evidence set out in the previous chapters shows that it is certainly not a direct hindrance. The effects of censorship are subtler. In Syria, sites are censored and bloggers imprisoned, but alongside this the notion has been created that those who are actively using blogs in Syria are doing so for transgressive purposes and to further their own political ulterior motives. Indeed, many bloggers stressed that the word blog has become synonymous in Syria with politics or opposition. In this way, the censorship of sites and the perception that the Internet is under surveillance lead to self-censorship rather than exclusion. Legal and political restrictions alone do not necessarily exclude people from accessing the Internet. These variables can be seen to act in relation to each other and together constitute meanings over what the Internet is to those using it

There are also inequalities that exist offline relating to gender and these have been seen to be transferable online in ways that are particular to the two countries studied

in this research. The number of male bloggers in both Lebanon and Syria has remained much higher than that of females. Many women are excluded from using alternative access points such as Internet cafes in the evening when the price of use is generally lower. Some families spoken to during the fieldwork also asserted that they do not allow their female children to go to cafes because they are places where young men allegedly go to do 'bad things' like looking at pornography and chatting with the opposite sex. Examples like this, discussed in Chapter 4, demonstrate that there are many contextual variables that may affect whether people have the resources or cultural 'skill set' to use the technology. All these factors are relational, changing over time but working together to privilege a certain habitus to use the Internet.

It is clear that the socio-cultural milieu one lives in over-determines whether one enters the field of blogging to begin with. Indeed, a new communication tool cannot completely obliterate all overt and internalized structures in place within a given society and bloggers are social and cultural beings before they enter the blogosphere. Yet this does not mean that all activities on the Internet have the same rules of engagement and that one only needs access to a computer to close the digital divide. In believing so, we are in danger of assuming that the Internet is monolithic and that in countries with similar levels of access, people will engage with the tool in similar ways. Instead, blogging is a form of production and is thus predicated on more than a simple connection to the Internet.

The blogosphere like any other space, is not only hierarchically structured between the 'haves' and 'have nots', but also has competing ideas over what should count as 'having' (Maton, 2005:690). By only looking at the context, milieu, and location, we fall into the realm of "cultural determinism", or in Hine's (2000) terms, we view the Internet as only a 'cultural artefact'. By doing so, we not only lose track of the fact that the Internet has a multitude of uses with contested meanings, but we do not recognise the relational character of social life online. We then assume that any object transversing the Internet, can solely be explained by the intrinsic properties of the object transversing it (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992:100). This is problematic because it relies on the assumption that those entering the blogosphere already know what it means to be a blogger, as if it is an inherent quality. Bloggers are not born

bloggers but acquire the properties of a blogger (albeit in differing ways) through their socialisation in the blogosphere. They learn what the stakes are, and position themselves and are positioned within these stakes. For this reason bloggers often defined their own blogging activities in contrast to and in comparison to others and there were shifting meanings as to what is valued within the socialisation of bloggers and what is not. Blogging about human rights and civil issues is more valued amongst Syrian bloggers than blogging in "opposition" to the government or covering politically sensitive topics. Maya (SB1), one of the most well known bloggers in Syria, openly writes about issues on homosexuality on her blog that she has no means to write about elsewhere in Syria.

By acknowledging that the effects of the wider context are *mediated* (Swartz, 1997: 119) in the blogosphere, we recognise that there may be specific dynamics operating between bloggers and resources that are valued more than others. This does not mean that location and milieu are obliterated. This can be considered a form of double contextualisation where the wider context and the bloggers' world are set in relation to one another. This means that it is important to not only at the external factors affecting blogging but also the internal dynamics of the blogosphere. Analysis showed that marks of differentiation, such as anonymity and language used, in blogging were not a direct product of a person's context, but that the same marks have acquired different meanings at different points in the blogosphere.

From the beginning of my research until 2008, the Syrian blogosphere was a small agglomeration of mostly English language blogs. Blogging in English was the dominant form and use of English was almost necessary to gain entrance to the world of blogging. This changed gradually as many new entrants began to blog in Arabic and their numbers grew larger. That phenomenon in turn could be attributed to a number of contextual factors such as better access to the Internet, blog hosting tools supporting Arabic, and increased media coverage of blogs. The English-language bloggers were no longer then just "Syrian bloggers", as they once were, but became "Syrian English-language bloggers", who were regarded as having certain characteristics. They were seen as expatriates, the elite of Syrian society and people with liberal stances vis-à-vis politics and society. In contrast, the opposite qualities were projected onto the Arabic bloggers. Of course there are divergences in these

meanings and cases of bloggers who do not fit these categorisations. Yet the example of language choice is one that shows that it is neither the wider context that over-determines the blogosphere nor the blogosphere that sets the rules of engagement – but rather both that work together simultaneously. This finding illustrated the local specificity and shifting dynamics of the blogosphere.

Similarly, received wisdom on the use of anonymity was found not to apply to bloggers in Lebanon and Syria. Syrian bloggers who were assumed to need anonymity in order to escape the censorship and other restrictions imposed on them turned out to be less anonymous online than the Lebanese. Many Syrian bloggers revealed during interviews and in the open-ended survey questionnaire that they found anonymity to be insincere and cowardly. They felt it was more credible to have a real name and persona behind one's writing, if blogging was to be taken as a serious activity. The stance adopted by some on this issue led many other anonymous bloggers to follow suit and write with their real name. In Lebanon, on the other hand, a different interpretation was placed on anonymity. Many bloggers, and especially political bloggers, avoided revealing their full name because in most cases their name would indicate the religious sect they were born into, which in turn could trigger assumptions about their political affiliation. But they were ready to reveal other identity markers on their blogs instead and often met up with other bloggers offline. Bloggers' practices regarding the use of anonymity in my study was not a 'reveal all or reveal nothing' strategy. Anonymity had meanings within the blogosphere that changed throughout time and bloggers, depending on their ideals of blogging, responded and contributed to the creation of these meanings.

As illustrated in Chapter 7, how bloggers perceive others in the blogosphere and how they communicate and interact with each other is largely diverse and often specific to each individual. Yet there were certain practices and patterns that came up that have been under-emphasised in previous research. Both the Lebanese and Syrian bloggers expressed a degree of autonomy regarding their blogs, viewing them as a space of their own where they essentially write what they see as important rather than writing for a perceived audience. But the Lebanese and Syrians had differing views on the degree of autonomy they wanted to achieve. This was relational to a number of factors that had to do with the wider context and the changes in the values ascribed to

blogging. In Syria bloggers found blogging to constitute an alternative and unique space for their activities because of the clamping down on the media by their government. Although it is not a particularly united blogosphere or one that has made the substantial changes they had hoped it would, bloggers in Syria find that merely expressing diverse points of view is a privilege in itself and thus are more likely to respond to commentators and carry out common discussions with other Syrian bloggers. In contrast, in Lebanon, bloggers find that the rifts within bloggers after the war are just a reflection of the society they live in, that is divided by sectarian and political ideologies. They articulated at the time of interviews a more independent and non-communitarian attitude to blogging. Thus rather than respond to commentators or carry out discussions on their blogs, they were more concerned with writing their own posts. In retrospect, these subtle differences in the meanings that bloggers associate to their blogging activities and socialisation online may have been missed out on had my research not been comparative.

8.2 Shifting Local Specificities

Who bloggers are and why they blog are two primary questions pertaining to the study of bloggers. Yet, to me, they were ones that seemed the most problematic to answer because they required a stable portrayal of the act of blogging, one that closed it off and made it self-contained, while the evidence I had accumulated and was trying to make sense of pointed to the blogosphere's shifting and relational attributes.

My initial endeavour was to portray as transparently as possible the perspectives of the average Syrian and Lebanese blogger. In contrast to the overarching generalisations made by the media about blogging in the Middle East, which were largely based on observation, speculation and the example of a few selected bloggers, I wanted to interview bloggers themselves and then present what they told me about their activities. It was their perspective that was important to me and that I believed would do justice to their activity. Yet it would have been highly simplistic to only recount what they had told me at a given moment. It was only through the

longitudinal and comparative investigation that I was able to situate their articulations within the varied contexts they were part of.

Why they blog, I found, is often a complex array of strategic positions they choose at different points in time and in different contexts. Why they blog is changing and relational to their personal circumstances, external circumstances and on how blogging as a tool is perceived. The analysis of each is over-determined by and understood only in relation to the others. Moreover, what they say about why they blog should not be to taken as an index of their truths because people are not aware of all the factors that have influenced why they do what they do. My thesis aimed at investigating the factors that influenced why they do what they do and the meanings that blogging has for them, rather than attempting to only understand individual motivations. These include changing personal circumstances, political and social events in a particular country, and different ideas that come to dominate about what blogging means to bloggers who socialise with each other.

In terms of finding out the demographics of Syrian and Lebanese bloggers, as discussed in Chapter 3, my survey findings were not sufficient to be representative of the blogging population. Even if they had been, the identities of those who took part in the blogosphere changed significantly during the timeframe of my research, so that, as demonstrated by the examples summarised above, a single snapshot at a particular point in time would have been far too shallow.

The rapid changes between 2004 and 2010 on the meanings associated with blogging also illustrate the relational and shifting attributes of blogging. When Syrian and Lebanese blogging started in 2004, bloggers from both countries had a yearning for unity among bloggers to emerge online. Bloggers in Lebanon in 2005 had a sense that bloggers were going to occupy a middle ground, removed from the sectarian and ethnic rivalries that plague the mainstream Lebanese media. Similarly, in Syria, bloggers often spoke of blogs as 'being important and not for fun or entertainment'. Mashouh's blog aggregator initiative stemmed from a perceived need to unify bloggers. Disappointment with Lebanon's blogosphere after the July 2006 war and the political deadlock accompanying it was with the lack of unity that was directly translated online. The Lebanese blog aggregator, an initiative by 30 Lebanese

bloggers, was closed down as a result of the lack of unity. Standish, who researched Syrian blogs in 2007, found that the amount of discussion on what blogging can do "provoked such anger and disillusionment" that the very discussion itself indicated the "hope and desire for change that the Internet must have once sparked" (Standish: 2008: 71).

The idea of blogs enabling collective action could be a consequence of the general popular rhetoric surrounding blogging and the example of the early bloggers in Egypt. It can also be taken to be a position of resistance to the already existing media practices in the countries in question. Either way, this appears to confirm Hine's points (2000: 154) that there is always a negotiation of appropriate uses of the Internet and that these are constantly changing and 'open to interpretation'. In other words, its uses are always contingent and fluid. That is not to say that bloggers themselves offered a varied or conflictual characterization of their blogging activities. On the contrary, they represented their activities as stable and meaningful to them at the particular time.

What this shows is that the blogosphere is fluid sustained by the people who comprise it and with boundaries that shift according to how the practised of those sustaining them remain meaningful. Indeed, bloggers are not born as such but acquire what it means to blog through their socialisation as bloggers. Through their practices, they learn what is possible and not possible and what the stakes are in blogging. Through their socialisation, relations and groupings are formed and sustained. These groupings are not necessarily observable, nor are they concrete or stable. Bloggers know each other as bloggers and there are certain shifting rules and practices that come to form what blogging means for them. They respond to one another indirectly and position themselves against and towards the practices of other bloggers. They are all interrelated as a function of the same system. But what is the system? Is there a Lebanese or Syrian blogosphere?

8.3 Boundaries of the blogosphere

Socialisation on the Internet has often been described in terms of 'community' (Rheingold, 1993). Dissatisfied with this approach and the lack of a watertight definition of community, I preferred to start out with Bourdieu's concept of 'field' (Bourdieu 1980, Bourdieu 1993, Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) as it seemed as though it would allow me not to reduce my analysis to observable interactions "focus[ing] only upon the immediate and visible logic of interactions – but to also pay sufficient attention to structural positions of agents with each other" (Crossley, 2005:81) and the "invisible relations that shape action rather than properties given in commonsense categories" (Swartz, 1997: 119)

In drawing overall conclusions, however, I find that the concept of field, as developed by Bourdieu (1980, 1993), was a part of a useful theoretical framework but ill suited in application or as an empirical research tool to a Lebanese or Syrian blogosphere. While it is true that there are certain properties of the blogosphere and understood practices and norms to blogging that suggest it could be analysed in terms of a 'field'. For example: bloggers write primarily for each other; they relate to each other as bloggers; they often meet offline; some become more well-known than others so there are unequal distributions of resources in the field or 'dominant and subordinate positions' (Vandenberghe, 1999, 52); there are norms and practices that have more legitimacy than others and certain barriers to the field, such as a need for economic and linguistic capital in order to blog. Moreover, there is a degree of (relative) autonomy in terms of practices and assumptions (written and unwritten rules) that distinguishes blogging from other forms of journalism or Internet communication.

On the other hand, however, the blogosphere is relatively new, constantly changing and much less clearly defined and instituted than the fields that Bourdieu has researched (see for example Field of Literature 1996a, Field of Higher Education 1996b, Field of Journalism 1998b). Moreover, bloggers belong to many communities, fields or sites and are bound to them in varying ways. Bloggers are not only bloggers but they are doctors, researchers, artists, writers and computer programmers, belonging to many different fields. Indeed, what makes a blogger

'Syrian' or 'Lebanese' is not something intrinsic to the individual. Neither is there any generalisable rule about this form of identification online. For that reason, establishing which forms of capital and resources in the field were more valued than others was difficult to discern. Additionally the composition of bloggers changed rapidly within the time frame of this research, so it was difficult to identify the collective habituses in a conclusive way or determine the extent to which their habituses were meaningfully determined by their status as bloggers.

Indeed, the agglomerations that are forming in the blogosphere are too fluid to conclusively project certain properties onto them by using concepts such as community or field. Community or field bring about certain boundedness to the research inquiry while the interactions and belonging to a Syrian and Lebanese blogosphere is lived and sustained by those who partake in it. Therefore, it is important to see how these interactions, visible and invisible, are sustained and what they mean to the user. Indeed, constructing the blogosphere as a field in its own right places it as a sociological phenomenon, an already existing and static entity and gives it analytical purchase. Meanwhile, the research showed it shifting meanings to bloggers. Therefore, rather than look out for the properties inherent in the bloggers socialisation with each other, it is important to look for why these connections between others are made and what are the factors that influence why they may be meaningful to them at particular point in time. That is not to say, that my being informed by Bourdieu's concepts had a negative affect on the research. On the contrary, the concept of the field allowed me to look out for properties and characteristics that a hard interactionist perspective would not have allowed. Yet, what I found during the research was that the blogosphere is a participant category, made meaningful by those who partake in it and something to be found and researched rather than taken for granted as existing.

Indeed, my interviews showed bloggers to be Syrian or Lebanese because this was how they chose to identify themselves on their blogs. At the time of research, bloggers interviewed wrote about local issues, they also wrote about international issues from a local viewpoint and they responded (whether directly or not) to the other bloggers within their country. When they explained what their blog is like, they contrast it vis-à-vis other blogs inside their own country, they pointed to divisions,

clusters, 'good' bloggers and 'bad' bloggers within the same country. This does not signify that the meanings of blogging encounters are circumscribed by national borders; bloggers look at blogs from outside their own country, read media stories about blogging all over the world and incorporate that meaning into their own activities. Moreover, blogging began in both countries with expatriate bloggers who interact with differing structures affecting why and how they blog. These bloggers also contribute to the meanings associated with blogging. Indeed, blogging did not begin in Lebanon and Syria and the collective discourse on blogging may have had an impact on how and why people in Lebanon and Syria began to blog. At the same time, however, the national policy-driven technical and financial accessibility of the blogosphere, bloggers' shared understanding of what it means to use the Internet and blog, their socialization as bloggers and their sharing of common concerns, have all combined to constitute a blogosphere that has been largely national.

Bloggers from Lebanon and Syria articulated unprompted, practices that enacted national boundaries. They referred to and talked about bloggers from their respective countries – whether these people were blogging from abroad or not. They articulated their practices in terms of the activities they got involved in online, and these activities were largely related to national concerns. The national identity of the grouping they belonged to was formed and sustained through the bloggers' social relations. Indeed, people who share similar experiences and endure and enjoy the same concerns (and thus have similar habitus), will often find themselves in similar configurations of social relationships. Bloggers in both Lebanon and Syria understood blogging in a way that is significant to their everyday lives. They have shared a history of the emergence of the Internet and its understood meanings and practices and are constrained by the same wider structures, albeit in different ways. Their habitus is a product of their socialization in the world and the internalization of structures and rules that surrounding them. People's use of a technology is affected by where they live in different ways; differences include the different meanings of 'nation' and the different ways nations exercise power over their constituents. Within these national environments there will be similarities in how bloggers come to understand their activities. Bloggers position themselves in relation to and in contrast to their environments. If they do not have the mental schema with which to understand the significance of other people's blog content, they are not likely to find

the participation with them meaningful. This is why we may not see much socialization between bloggers from diverse countries, and between Lebanon and Syria as discussed in Chapter 7. Blogs are understood to be spaces where people talk about issues directly affecting their own lives, and from their own point of view. These points of view come from a context, which explains why others from similar contexts are the ones who are most likely to find significance in the point of view. Yet this does mean that the Lebanese or Syrian blogosphere is homogeneous or that all those who participate in it are the same or share the same habitus. Habitus changes from one individual to the next. People have had extremely different experiences and are widely different in the way culture may determine their actions. What can be said in the case of Lebanese and Syrian bloggers is that participants in the blogosphere share much in common with others of the same nationality. Thus they enact, or perform, their nationality, because it makes sense to them to do so on blogs. They choose to belong to the configuration of other bloggers in the same country because it is significant to them. However, we can also find Lebanese and Syrian bloggers who may also participate with those in different places. A few of the bloggers interviewed and especially those blogging about more niche topics, such as art or technology, participated in other agglomerations that they found meaningful[140].

This does not mean that these identifications as Lebanese or Syrian bloggers are solid and fixed and will not change over time[141]. The practice of blogging is significantly changing in Lebanon and Syria. And the boundaries I have been referring to may not remain as they are, since the practice of blogging shifts throughout time. Indeed, the Lebanese blogosphere is showing signs of fragmentation. Lebanese bloggers in the more recent interviews described the Lebanese blogosphere as no longer an entity, having no central hub for its activities. They were hesitant and pessimistic about the idea of any sort of collective action or unity taking place on it. Many bloggers, while often still identifying themselves as Lebanese, belong to enclaves or diverse grouping according to interest. Reasons for this fragmentation, given in Chapter 5, include

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[140] Lina (LB2) for example says that many bloggers from all over the world came across her blog through a google search during the war as she was posting content about the events. She found that some visitors liked her work and kept returning and she still keeps contact with them.

[141] Please see Chapter 5.3 with example of Ramzi who when asked if I could interview him, said 'I have no contact with bloggers in Lebanon. I've stopped blogging on Lebanon Hearts [the Lebanese blog aggregator] and moved my focus to other topics that don't really interest the same people in Lebanon'

disillusion with the notion that that blogging could provide a centrist viewpoint to challenge Lebanon's offline political conflicts and divisions

8.4 Reflection on limitations

The four years I spent researching Lebanese and Syrian bloggers produced a significant amount of data: field notes, and interview transcripts ran into several hundred pages and I collected literature that were both interesting and relevant to my project. I do believe that there were some limitations to what I was able achieve. Firstly, while I had made an attempt to put together a set of methodologies that would best capture what was occurring in the blogosphere and guide me to a random variety of bloggers, the form of pragmatic sampling I used has inherent problems. The key one I faced was that many of the bloggers I was referred to were prominent and active with large followings. In making recommendations, bloggers were apparently compelled to guide me towards what they thought were the 'good' blogs, despite my plea that I want to interview anyone, regardless of their output and focus. Meanwhile my primary objective from the questionnaire was to capture a wider set of bloggers, those I did not have the practical accessibility to, such as those abroad. I did this by contacting a random selection of bloggers from the aggregators. Yet since, the response rate was very low and I also promoted contacts to send it out, I was also not able to tell which of the respondents came from the random call via the forum aggregators and which came from contacts of bloggers I had interviewed. If many of the respondents were friends of friends of bloggers I interviewed, this could have an effect on how representative the sample is of bloggers.

Moreover, by beginning with a premise to study a Lebanese and Syrian blogging phenomenon, I have in some ways reified its existence. On reflection, all my interviewees and respondents to the survey knew of my research topic generally; studying Lebanese and Syrian bloggers. While I attempted to have my interview methods as open as possible, there is a possibility that by merely interviewing Lebanese and Syrians, in virtue of their nationalities, they may have played up their belonging to a Lebanese and Syrian blogosphere, allowing me little insight into the other communities they were part of. In general, I feel that my interview methods

were satisfactory in soliciting an open form of discussion and allowing bloggers to lead the subject matter. I also benefited from the opportunity to conduct follow-up interviews with a number of informants and communicate regularly with them via chat, Facebook and meetings; this enabled me to probe and gather responses to themes and perspectives that were being developed throughout transcription and later stages of enquiries.

Another shortcoming was the relationality of blogging to other forms of computer-mediated communication that had emerged at the time of research. Over the course of the research Facebook became hugely popular in Lebanon and Syria. Indeed, many bloggers activities were affected by the emergence of Facebook. Some bloggers embraced it, posting their blog entries directly into Facebook to increase coverage. Others separated it from their activities, finding it to be of completely different value, in the sense of reaching out to friends and acquaintances rather than reaching out to an audience of similar and particular interests. Meanwhile some found it to be a good alternative to blogging. The conclusion is that, whatever the bloggers' reaction to social networking sites, the relationality of blogging now extended to encompass an extra variable. Thus changing technologies have an impact on how and for what other technologies are used. Although the issue of social networking was outside the scope of my study, my findings suggest that, with the advent of Facebook and Twitter, bloggers had to show an act of 'rigorousness' or re-structuring of their activities online. In Lebanon a filtering seemed to be taking place, whereby it was no longer feasible to use blogs as a mere outlet but rather they had to be used to express a niche and narrow focus. In the face of this filtering, bloggers who were mostly read by a small known audience of friends and family found Facebook to be a better tool. The practice of using blogs to gather an audience, announce events or campaign was also in decline. One respondent to the survey said: 'Facebook and other means offered a more focused approach to a more targeted audience, and the readership of blogs had already dropped so much that it didn't include many beyond the people who were meeting offline'. Another said, 'Facebook killed the blogger. And I got bored of it. No one visits it [the blog] anymore'.

Similarly, in Syria, many of the bloggers interviewed often talked about the huge popularity of forums in Syria and contrasted their blogging activity to the activities of those using the forums. The Internet café researcher in Damascus mentioned the extensive use of forums he found during his observations. However, given the lack of other sources on the subject in Syria, my only insight to the world of forums was through the comments of bloggers themselves. They had strong opinions regarding the differences between those who participated in forums as compared with those who blogged and between the different types of content generated in each case. Those participating in forums, they said, were doing so to waste time, chit chat with women, and praise each other, rather than delve into important topics. While I attempted to gain insight to that world through browsing some of the more popular forums in Syria, the vastness of it and the time it would have taken to fully grasp what it meant was outside the scope of this research. The lack of research on other forms of computer mediated communication in Lebanon and Syria made the construction of the extent of their socialisation on blogs had to establish. Indeed, the relationality of blogging to forums is something that remains to be elucidated.

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Appendix A – Interview log

<u>Lebanese Bloggers</u>

LB1
Name: Bassem
Date of interview: 5 March 2008
Location: Home in Sursock, Beirut, Lebanon

LB2
Name: Lina
Date of interview: 12 March 2008
Location: Rootspace offices, Beirut, Lebanon

LB3
Name: Bachir
Date of first interview: 12 March 2008
Date of second interview: 5 Jan 2009
Location: Rootspace offices / Café Younis, Beirut, Lebanon

LB4
Name: Samir
Date of interview: 13 March 2008
Location: Rootspace, Beirut, Lebanon

LB5
Name: Ramzi
Date of interview: 20 March 2008
Location: Café Younis, Beirut, Lebanon

LB6
Name: Firas
Date of interview: 24 March 2008
Location: Rootspace, Beirut, Lebanon

LB7
Name: Amin
Date of interview: 24 March 2008
Location: Leo Burnett offices, Beirut, Lebanon

LB8
Name: Zeina
Date of interview: 28 March 2008
Location: Costa Café, Beirut, Lebanon

LB9
Name: Ghassan
Date of interview: 28 March 2008

Location: Rootspace offices, Beirut, Lebanon

LB10
Name: Sarah
Date of interview: 8 January 2009
Location: Café Younis, Beirut, Lebanon

LB11
Name: Kamal
Date of interview: 5 January 2009
Location: Lina's café, Beirut, Lebanon

LB12
Name: M.S
Date of interview: 8 January 2008
Location: Café Younis, Hamra, Beirut, Lebanon

LB13
Name: Mary
Date of interview: 3 January 2009
Location: café in the ABC shopping centre, Beirut, Lebanon

Syrian Bloggers

SB1
Name: Maya Ghazawi
Date of first interview: 20 March 2008
Date of second interview: 4 January 2009
Location: Bab Touma café, Damascus, Syria / Café Younis, Hamra, Beirut, Lebanon

SB2
Name: Hasan
Date of first interview: 24 March 2008
Date of second interview: 19 January 2009
Location: Bab Touma café, Damascus, Syria

SB3
Name: Omar
Date of interview: 24 March 2008
Location: Café in Mezze, Damascus, Syria

SB4
Name: Ziad
Date of interview: 25 March 2008
Location: Café in Abu Rummaneh, Damascus, Syria

SB5
Name: Fadi
Date of interview: 4 January 2008
Location: Bab Touma café, Damascus, Syria

SB6
Name: Sami
Date of interview: 6 January 2009
Location: Café in Shaalan, Damasus, Syria

SB7
Name: Souraya
Date of interview: 6 January 2009
Location: Bab Sharki café, Damascus, Syria

SB8
Name: Nassim
Date of interview: 6 January 2009
Location: Old city, Damascus, Syria

SB9
Name: Rima
Date of interview: 6 January 2009
Location: Shaalan, Damascus, Syria

SB10
Name: Akram
Date of interview: 5 January 2009
Location: Costa café, Hamra, Beirut, Lebanon

Internet Service Providers

ISP1
Name: Anonymous; Managing director of a main ISP in Lebanon
Date of interview: 15 March 2008
Location: Company offices, Beirut, Lebanon.

ISP2
Name: Hadi Hazim; Technical manager of *Terranet*, a main ISP in Lebanon
Date of interview: 18 March 2008
Location: Terranet offices, Beirut, Lebanon

ISP3
Name: Abed Jeblawi; Marketing research manager of *Aloola*, a main ISP in Syria
Date of interview: 25 March 2008
Date of follow up phone interview: 7 August 2009

Miscellaneous

Café owner
Name: Wael, Internet café owner
Date of interview: 24 March 2008
Additional information: Wael was still in process of waiting for approval to open up the café. This interview lasted two hours and was recorded and transcribed by myself.

Internet development project director
Name: Nour Eldin Cheikh Obeid; **Internet development project director**
Date of interview: 23 March 2008
Additional information: Cheikh Obeid is National project director for the Strategic ICT Programme for Social and Economic Development (a joint UNDP and government project)

Blogger meeting
Bloggers present: Nour Al Asaad, Afifa el Samad, Ashraf Osman and Ghassan Abichaker
Date of interview: 19 March 2008
Location: Costa café, Beirut, Lebanon

Lebanese Families

LF1
The Saleh family in a southern suburb of Beirut (five female children between the ages of 6 and 15 years old)
Additional information: I met the Saleh family at a village in the south of Lebanon during a visit and asked if I could come to talk to them about their internet use. I spoke to the children alone and then altogether with the parents.
Date of interview: 12 March 2008
Location: Beirut Lebanon

LF2
The Jadam family in Beirut (four children between the ages of 15 and 25)
Additional information: I met the mother during a visit with the BBC to a public school in the southern suburbs of Beirut and asked if I could visit them.
Date of interview: 5 April 2009
Location: Beirut Lebanon

BBC meetings during scoping trips (used in research)

Internet development projects

Name: Dima Shehadeh; **Internet development project manager**
Additional information: Shehadeh is manager of the *Tawasul* project which is a joint UNDP / Minister of information project aimed at creating an online network for journalists under the age of 30.
Date of interview: 21 January 2010
Location: Damascus, Syria

Name: Jessica Dheere; **Internet development project director**
Additional information: Dheere is director of Social Media Exchange (SMX), which aims at encouraging media literacy and raising awareness about digital and social media
Date of interview: 3 April 2009
Location: Beirut, Lebanon

Human rights organisations

Name: Elijah Zarwan; Human Rights Watch (HRW)
Additional information: Zarwan wrote the report *'False Freedom: Internet in the Arab world'* (2005) for HRW.
Date of interview: 5 April 2009
Location: Cairo, Egypt

Name: Mazen Darwich; President of Syrian Centre for Media & Freedom of Expression (SCMFE)
Additional information: SCMFE is a partner organization of Reporters Without Borders, and regularly publishes reports and research on Media and freedom of expression in Syria.
Date of interview: 20 October 2009
Location: Damascus, Syria

Miscellaneous

Maurice Aek (Journalist and blogger)
Date of interview: 18 October 2009
Location: Damascus, Syria

Name: Dr Arabi al Masri; Professor, University of Damascus
Information: al Masri is media studies professor at the Journalism faculty of University of Damascus and the Syrian International Academy for Training and Development.
Date of interview: 20 October 2010
Location: Damascus, Syria

Student group meetings

Students & head teacher at a public school in Beirut
Visit to a public school with BBC colleague Kate Noble in the southern suburbs of Beirut. We spoke to a class of students between 15-17 years old about their Internet use. We also interviewed the head teacher of the school. Information was used to research the idea of potentially doing a web drama in Lebanon.
Date of interview: 3 April 2009
Location: Beirut, Lebanon

Journalism students from the University of Damascus
One of the Syrian bloggers (SB7) and the journalism students I interviewed helped arrange a meeting with students at the University of Damascus. Eight students came to the meeting.
Date of interview: 19 January 2010
Location: Damascus, Syria

Recently graduated online journalists at Syria News organisation.
BBC partner organisation, online newspaper Syria News, arranged a meeting with all its interns and young freelance journalists.
Date of interview: 21 January 2010
Location: Damascus, Syria

Appendix B – Call for interview email

Example 1

Dear (NAME)

I hope you are well. I came across your blog on the Lebanese aggregator forum. I'm a PhD student at the University of Westminster, UK (http://www.wmin.ac.uk/mad/page-1659) in the Media, Art and Design department. I'm now in Beirut collecting data for my research and I'm interested in talking to some bloggers.

I would like to sit down and talk with you, but I wouldn't call my time with you an interview. It would rather be a session where we sit near a computer and have you give me a 'tour' of your blog and the discussions would be open-ended. I really hope you are up for it. I've done this already with a blogger listed on your links named Samir.

I'm flexible with space and have rented a little 'office' space in the Valli & Valli building near Kataeb office in Saifi, so we could always meet here? But we could meet anywhere in Beirut with wireless Internet. However, I don't have too much time left here as I'm leaving Beirut at the end of next week. Let me know if you are up for it or know any other bloggers who might be.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Many thanks,

Email example 2

Dear (NAME)

I was given your email by a couple of Syrian bloggers. Sorry to email you out of the blue. I'm a PhD student at the University of Westminster, UK (http://www.wmin.ac.uk/mad/page-1659) in the Media, Art and Design department and my research is on Internet use in Lebanon and Syria focusing on bloggers. I'm now on my second and last fieldwork trip interviewing bloggers from these countries.

I will be in Damascus on the 6 and 7th of January. I was wondering of we could meet for a coffee to talk about blogging in Syria and your blog. I'm flexible with a time and place (as long as it has internet) and I look forward to hearing from you.

Best wishes,

Appendix C – Consent Form

Please specify how you would like me to refer to you throughout the thesis and in future publications of the thesis authored by Maha Taki.

Thesis title: "Bloggers and the blogosphere in Lebanon & Syria"
Supervised by: Dr. Naomi Sakr
Institution: University of Westminster, London, UK.

1. I grant Maha Taki permission to use my full name, blog URL and any information obtained from the interview and/or blog in her research project and future publications.

Please note that I will be respecting any information you had specified as 'off the record' during the interview.

Signed by:

Date:

2. I grant Maha Taki permission to refer to me by my full name in her research but **not link my identity to my blog** and any content that would make the blog identifiable.

Signed by:

Date:

3. I grant Maha Taki permission to refer to my blog and its content throughout her research but **not use my full name** or any details that may allow my identity to be discernable.

Please be aware that by having your URL cited, you are agreeing that information you divulged during the interview will be linked back to your blog, which may jeopardise your anonymity.

Signed by:

Date:

4. I do not wish that my name be disclosed, the URL of my blog be referred to, or any information taken from the interview be used that may make my identity discernable.

Signed by:

Date:

Appendix D – Online questionnaire

SECTION 1: THE BLOG

1. What is your blog URL?
Please specify more than one if you are author or co-author of multiple blogs

2. When did you begin to blog?

1999 or before
2000
2001
2002
2003
2004
2005
2006
2007
2008

3. Country of residence?

Australia
Brazil
Canada
Egypt
France
Jordan
Lebanon
Syria
Saudi Arabia
UAE
U.K
USA
Other (please specify…)

4. Country of origin?

Australia
Brazil
Canada
Egypt
France
Jordan
Lebanon
Syria
Palestine
Saudi Arabia
UAE

U.K
USA
Other (please specify…)

5. What motivated you to start a blog?
Please pick a maximum of 5 main reasons and rank them from 1 (most important) to 5 (least important)

To get others to read my ideas and opinions
To interact with others
To feel part of a community
To make changes in society/ for social development
To develop my skills (writing/art/design/photography, if other please specify….)
To organize thoughts and record ideas
To express myself about a specific social or political event (please name event….)
To offer a counter opinion or an original view
To show own perspective on some issues
To write about topics that are somewhat ignored
Other (Please rank and specify in text box….)

6. What language do you blog in?
Please tick all that apply to you

Standard Arabic
Spoken Arabic
English
French
Armenian
Other (please specify…)

7. If you blog in a language other than Arabic, please tick or state below reason.
Please tick all options that apply to you

It is the language I feel most comfortable writing in
It is the international language of today
Most available sources are in that language
It is easier and more accessible than Arabic
It is a language that will gather a wider readership from all over the world
Other (please specify….)

8. What topics do you generally write about in your blog?
Please pick a maximum of 5 main reasons and rank them from 1 (most important) to 5 (least important)

Human rights issues or development
Local current affairs
International current affairs
Social issues in country of origin
Political issues in country of origin
International political issues
Activities, private thoughts and reflections
Poetry, literature, and art

Religion and spiritual matters
Other (please specify…)

SECTION 2: ANONYMITY

9. Are you anonymous (or use a made-up name)?

Yes
No
I'm anonymous on one blog, but reveal my identity on another one.

If you are not anonymous online please go to question 11.

10. Please pick which reason(s) led you to choose to be anonymous online?
Please tick all the options that apply

I don't feel safe because I'm afraid of repression from the government
I don't want my immediate surroundings to know about my blog
I do not want to be judged for the content of my blog
I do not want to be categorized
I feel more free if people don't know who I am (because...)
I haven't given it much thought/ because I can be
Other (please specify….)

11. Who do you reveal your real identity to?
Please tick all options that apply

No one
Those close to me in my personal life
Only other bloggers that I interact with and trust
Other (please specify….)

12. What drives you to reveal your identity?
Please tick all options that apply to you

It gives more credibility to my blog
I want recognition for my blog it
I don't think what I'm writing will get me in any trouble
I don't think anonymity online grants me the privacy I want anyway.
I haven't given it much thought
Other (please specify….)

SECTION 3: INTERACTIONS & OPINION

13. Who are the other bloggers you interact with? (Either through commenting system, email, chat, face-to-face meetings, linking).
Please tick all options that apply to you

Friends or acquaintances you know from outside of blogging
Bloggers you met online because of shared interests

Bloggers you met because of offline meetings taking place between bloggers
I don't usually interact with other bloggers
Other (please specify….)

14. How many people have you met (face to face) through blogging?

None
1-3
4-7
8-1
12 or more

15. Do you use any other social networking sites such as Facebook, Myspace, Bebo etc?

No
Yes…(please specify)

16. If yes, do you link it to your blog in any way? (Either explicitly publicize the blog or make references to it)?

No
Yes

17. Who is your target audience?
Please tick all that apply

Friends & acquaintances
People from own country
People from the Middle East or Arab world
People from all over the world
I don't have a target audience in mind
Other (please specify)

18. How long do you think you will keep blogging?

I have no intention of stopping
As long as I have the time for it
I think I will get bored or tired soon
When I finish my literary/political/art project that I blog on
As long as others are blogging and there is a community of people blogging
I don't blog anymore
Other (please specify)

19. If you stopped blogging, please explain below why?

20. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

I feel more free online and tend to say things I wouldn't say offline.
Strongly disagree / Disagree / Neutral / Agree / Strongly agree

I have been exposed to opportunities (related to personal or career development, media exposure, audience exposure) that could not have happened if I didn't blog.
Strongly disagree / Disagree / Neutral / Agree / Strongly agree

My online life and interactions are separate and distinct to my offline life.
Strongly disagree / Disagree / Neutral / Agree / Strongly agree

I **have interacted with people from blogging that I would never have been exposed to in my offline life.**
Strongly disagree / Disagree / Neutral / Agree / Strongly agree

21. Rank what you think is the most important aspect of blogging to you?
Please pick a maximum of 5 main reasons and rank them from 1 (most important) to 5 (least important)

To organize/archive ideas and thoughts
To meet people and network
To change things in society/politics/human rights
To have my work/writing shared with the public
To have the freedom to write things anonymously
To not have to answer to anyone, and have a space for myself
To have an audience to give me feedback on my blog
To expose myself to people I wouldn't usually meet from my own country
To expose myself to people I wouldn't usually meet from abroad
Other….

SECTION 4: DEMOGRAPHICS

And finally, please answer the few remaining questions below about yourself.

22. Gender

Male
Female

23. Age

13 and below
14-19
20-25
26-31
32-37
38-43
44-50
50-55
Above 55

24. Marital status

Engaged / In a relationship
Divorced
Married
Single
Widowed
Prefer not to say

25. Religious affiliation?

Alawi
Atheist
Baha'i
Catholic
Druze
Maronite
Orthodox
Shia
Sunni
Prefer not to say
Not yet decided
Other (please specify)

26. Education

Did not complete school education
School (Baccalaureate, high school)
Technical qualifications
Bachelor /License (university degree)
Masters degree
Doctoral level

27. Where did you study for your two highest degrees?
You can choose 2 if you studied at different places

Australia
Brazil
Canada
Egypt
France
Jordan
Lebanon
Syria
Saudi Arabia
UAE
U.K
USA
Other (please specify)

28. Occupation (please specify below)

29. Are you on any blog aggregator?
(such as www.lebanonheartblogs.blogspot.com or www.almudawen.net)
Please state which one(s) below.

30. Do you have any comments about this survey or anything that you would like to add about yourself and blogging?

Appendix E – Text of call for questionnaire

Dear blogger

I'm currently doing exploratory research on blogging for my PhD degree at the University of Westminster and would really appreciate it if I could take a few minutes of your time to fill out this questionnaire in order to help me find out more about blogging in Lebanon and Syria. Your replies are crucial to helping my evaluation. Most people are able to complete the questionnaire in less than 8 minutes.

Please note that your responses and any comments will be treated with the utmost confidentiality and your annonymity will be granted throughout my analysis. If you have questions at any time about the survey or the procedures, please do not hesitate to contact me at **mahataki@gmail.com**.

Thank you very much for your time and valuable input and please pass on the link to other bloggers. The survey is available in English or Arabic. Please pick which langauge you prefer to answer in from the links below:

English version:
http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=ga_2f1i2evTudF5QgJDGWXow_3d_3d

Arabic version:
http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=XxEzT1inehCPe3BKOqjYDw_3d_3d

Two different screenshots of the call out for survey
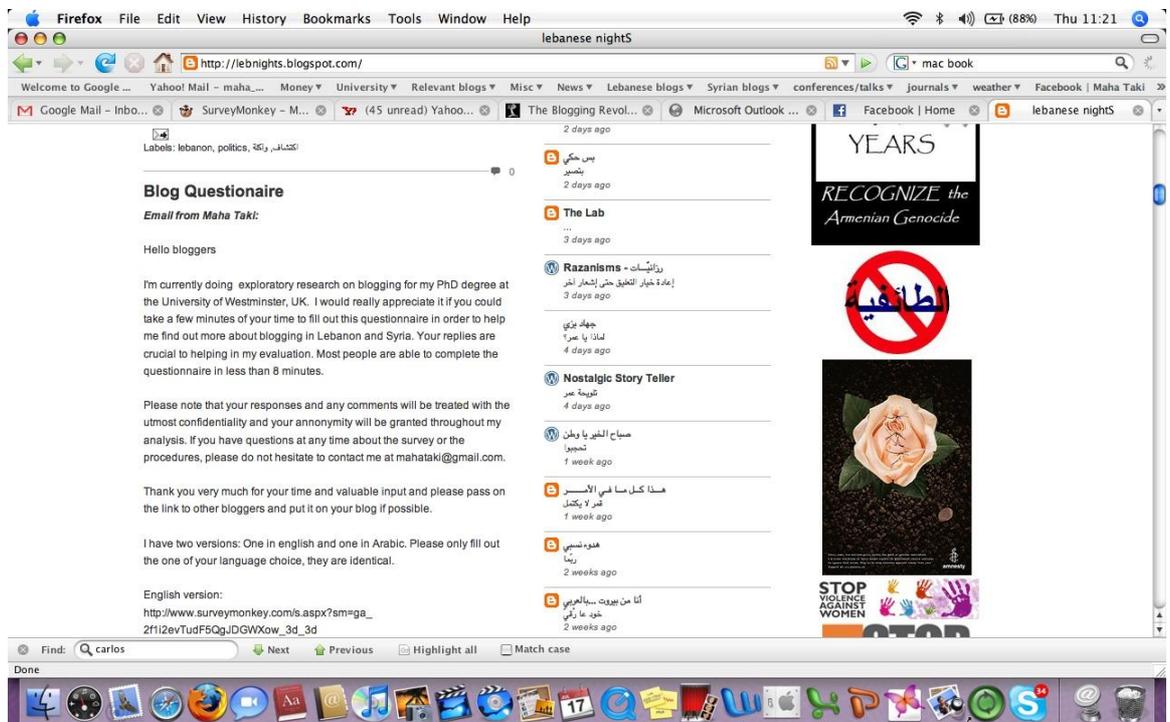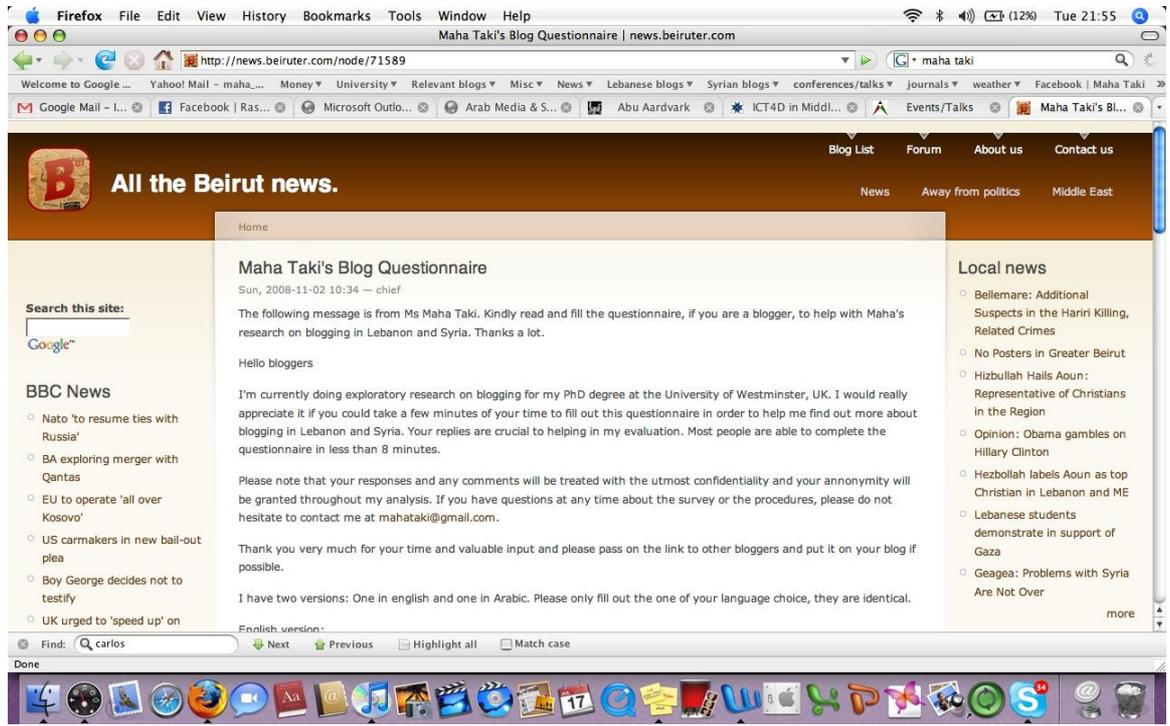
Appendix F – URLs of the blog respondents to survey

Lebanese bloggers

1	http://ibosblog.blogspot.com
2	http://remarkz.wordpress.com
3	http://hiwartalkalogue.blogspot.com/
4	http://achinar.blogspot.com/
5	http://www.zilalwarefa.net/
6	www.reemfayyad.com
7	http://nadche.blogspot.com
8	http://mazenkerblog.blogspot.com
9	Losing3it.blogspot.com
10	http://lebanonheartblogs.blogspot.com,
11	http://www.suzanne alaywan.blogspot.com/
12	www.peacemiddleeast.blogspot.com
13	hashemscribbles.blogspot.com
14	www.weblb.com
15	allthehydrogenintheworld.blogspot.com
16	http://bedouina.typepad.com
17	besidebeirut.wordpress.org
18	http://lebnights.blogspot.com
19	http://forabetterlebanon.blogspot.com/
20	kodder.net, halfeuropean.blogspot.com,
21	lebdaylife.blogspot.com,
22	rfhell.blogspot.com and others...
23	http://rashakahilblog.blogspot.com
24	http://cedarseed.livejournal.com
25	on-boredom.blogspot.com
26	http://computeraidedelirium.blogspot.com/
27	www.penseesbeyrouthines.over-blog.com
28	www.blackr0se.jeeran.com
29	htp://hilalchouman.wordpress.com

Syrian bloggers

1	http://yaser1978.wordpress.com
2	www.ramivitale.com
3	basheer.b@gmail.com
4	http://yasaminatdimashq.wordpress.com
5	http://fatoshaa.wordpress.com
6	www.adab-online.com
7	http://anasqtiesh.wordpress.com; http://annooss.blogspot.com
8	www.redman4u.com
9	lord.blond@gmail.com
10	http://lord-m-m.blogspot.com/
11	http://mhabach.wordpress.com/
12	www.syrianbreeze.blogspot.com
13	www.syriangavroche.com, www.yass1984.blogspot.com
14	URL not provided
15	maysharun.wordpress.cpom
16	syriantales.blogspot.com, splinterofthemindseye.blogspot.com
17	http://tash7ajari.wordpress.com
18	ma.abdallah2007@gmail.com
19	www.abekdash.com
20	http://3bdulsalam.wordpress.com/ http://abdulsalam1978.spaces.live.com
21	www.razanghazzawi.com.
22	URL not provided
23	http://alloushblog.wordpress.com/
24	http://thefreemen.wordpress.com/
25	Marfa'a
26	www.maramsoft.co.cc
27	wa2elblog.wordpress.com
28	URL not provided
29	housam.wordpress.com	www.housamz.com
30	http://homam.arabianlabs.com
31	www.janmasouh.com
32	http://mariyahsblog.blogspot.com
33	http://www.tawileh.net/anas
34	Zozo2k3.blogspot.com
35	http://roneceve.blogspot.com/
36	http://yaser1978.wordpress.com
37	www.ramivitale.com

Appendix G – Results of questionnaire

This appendix presents the findings of the online questionnaire sent out to bloggers in Lebanon and Syria on December 2008. As discussed in Chapter 3, the questionnaire was constructed using themes extrapolated from the first fieldwork session that took place in March 2008. The data were gathered from those residing in, or originating from Lebanon and Syria. Data from the questionnaire were split according to respondents' country of origin; Lebanese and Syrian, to see if there were any patterns emerging that differentiated the activities of each significantly

The first question asked the respondents to provide the URL of their blog. It was optional so that bloggers who do not want to share details about themselves and link it to the blog were not excluded. All of the respondents except three of Syrian origin provided it. Appendix F lists the URLs of the blogs. After a process of filtering, the questionnaire gathered 66 responses in total: 29 from Lebanon and 37 from Syria. The data were coded and analysed using SPSS, a data analysis software for quantitative analysis. The Mann Witney Test on SPSS was also carried out to see if there were any statistically significant differences between the responses of female and male bloggers and bloggers abroad and those residing in their country of origin; however, my sample was too small to detect any significant patterns. While most answers were based on the respondents' selection from a multiple-choice format, all the questions solicited further textual explanation and clarification through an 'other' option. Throughout the discussion, I use capital N to denote the sample size of the survey and lower case n to denote frequency of chosen option. The full questionnaire is provided in Appendix D.

While the response sample was too small to allow conclusive or broad remarks to be drawn from the questionnaire data, it did provide me with data from a broader circle of bloggers than my interview sample. Moreover, it allowed me to discern if there were themes that my first interviews did not account for and that I could take into consideration during my second fieldwork session. I discuss these as I go through the findings below.

1. Demographics

In Lebanon and Syria, the number of males that blogged exceeded that of females. In Lebanon, 17 bloggers (N=29) said they were male and in Syria 23 (N=37). A few respondents (one in Lebanon and five in Syria) did not answer this question. This may be due to the fact that these questions were placed towards the end of the survey and respondents had become impatient[142]. However, I was able to find out the gender of some of these respondents by checking the URL that they provided of their blog. In Lebanon the one blogger who did not fill in the "gender" option was a Lebanese female [ww.penseesbeyrouthines.over-blog.com]. In the 'about me' section she wrote "Ahlan wa sahlan! c'est le blog d'Elite , journaliste libanaise , jai 23 ans…" (Arabic and French). This is translated to 'Welcome to the blog of Elite. I'm a Lebanese Journalist [feminine in French], 23 years old.

Table 1 – Gender of blogger (Lebanese origin)

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	17	58.6
Female	11 +1	37.9
Total	28	96.6
Missing	1 (Female)	3.4
Total (N)	29	100.0

In Syria, five respondents did not fill in the "gender" box. However, I was only able to find out the gender of two of them. The other three either did not provide the URL of their blog. The two whose gender was easy to discern were; Maram [http://www.maramsoft.co.cc/?page_id=2] who writes in Arabic on her blog "My name is Maram and I'm a girl who lives in the world of dreams". Similarly blogger http://www.syriangavroche.com writes his full name on his blog, Yaseen Al Souwaihia, and has a picture.

---

[142] Two respondents complained in the comment box at the end of the questionnaire that it took longer than the eight minutes I had proposed it would in the call to take the questionnaire.

Table 2 – Gender of blogger (Syrian origin)

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	21+ (1 female)	56.8
Female	11 + (1 male)	29.7
Total	32	86.5
Missing	3 missing	13.5
Total (N)	37	100.0

The age group that blogged the most in both Lebanon and Syria (55% and 42% respectively) is between 26 - 31. In Lebanon the second highest age group was 32-36, older than that of bloggers from Syrian origin (20-25).

Table 3 – Age of blogger

Age Group	Syria Frequency	Lebanon Frequency
14-19	1	0
20-25	13	2
26-31	14	16
32-37	3	6
38-43	2	1
44-49	0	3
Total	33	28
Missing	4	1
Total (N)	37	29

As for country of residence, just over half of those surveyed in both countries lived in their country of origin; Syria (51.4%) and Lebanon (58.6%) with the rest living abroad. The country where most bloggers lived outside their home country was the United States. The respondents to the survey were highly educated with 31 (N=37) in Syria and 25 (N=29) in Lebanon having at least a bachelor degree. In Lebanon, furthermore, 11 of the respondents had a Masters degree and three a Doctorate. Approximately 48% of respondents from Lebanon and 36% in Syria studied outside of their own country for one of their two highest degrees. This is similar to the findings of the questionnaire in 2005 (Taki, 2005) that found bloggers to be highly educated and having received some education outside of their country of origin.

Table 4 – Education

Education	Syria Frequency	Syria Percent	Lebanon Frequency	Lebanon Percent
Did not complete school education	0	0	1	3.4
School	1	2.7	0	0
Technical qualifications	2	5.4	0	0
University degree	22	59.5	11	37.9
MA	8	21.6	11	37.9
Doctorate	1	2.7	3	10.3
Total	34	91.9	26	89.7
Missing	3	8.1	3	3.4
Total (N)	37	100	29	3.4

The majority of both the Lebanese (n=15 out of N= 29) and Syrian bloggers (n=23 out of N=37) were single. This could be attributed to the time blogging consumes and thus those with less family obligations may have the luxury of time to blog.

Table 5 – Marital status in Lebanon and Syria

Marital status	Syria Frequency	Syria Percent	Lebanon Frequency	Lebanon Percent
Engaged/ Relationship	4	10.8	5	17.2
Divorced	0	0	3	10.3
Married	6	16.2	5	17.2
Single	23	62.2	15	51.7
Total	33	89.2	28	96.6
Missing	4	10.8	1	3.4
Total (N)	37	100.0	29	100.0

Regarding religious affiliation, the most frequent option picked in Lebanon was 'atheist' (n=7 of 29) followed by an almost equal number of Muslim and Christian sects. The distributions do not show patterns that minorities are using the Internet in Lebanon and Syria more than others. In fact, the findings are largely compatible with

the distribution of sects in the Lebanese population[143]. In Syria 14 respondents put Sunni (N=37) which is the sect of the majority of Syrians, and 11 others chose the 'other' option. I had broken down Muslim into sect and perhaps due to sensitivities in Syria between the Sunni majority and ruling Alawites (see Chapter 2), five respondents from Syria suggested a 'Muslim' only option and three others had comments on the question itself. These were the comments received:

Table 6 – Comment section under religious affiliation

Respondent 1	Muslim
Respondent 2	Muslim
Respondent 3	Why not just Muslim?
Respondent 4	Muslim only
Respondent 5	Religion is a social construct, I don't believe in the concept itself. That's different from being an atheist.
Respondent 6	Muslim
Respondent 7	I don't know
Respondent 8	This question is stupid and has nothing to do with the survey and should not be asked in any circumstance.

The blogger who wrote the last comment above, a Syrian volunteer for Global Voices[144], also responded to an email I had sent to its administrators asking them to post the survey on their site. He expressed his disapproval of the fact that I had only asked about religion with regards to minorities. He wrote on 11/12/2008 in an email:

> Interesting to see that the only minorities in question were religious minorities, why stop there when you can ask about ethnicity, race, or sexual preference. Just being a minority doesn't mean you're oppressed and blogging about it; plus, had she needed such information she could just look at the content of the blogs rather than ask about the bloggers background. Most people are fine with disclosing their religious beliefs; I'm not fine with people asking about it!

---

[143] Lebanon has not conducted a population censuses since 1932 because of the sensitivity of what they would show concerning shifting sectarian balances, but that the balance is believed to be ..... and you would need to give a reference/source. This is important information given what you discover from Lebanese bloggers about not wanting to be lumped into a sectarian identification

[144] Global Voices is an international volunteer-led community of bloggers and translators who report on blogs from around the world. They have editors from different countries who translate and summarize self-published content found on blogs in their respective countries. http://globalvoicesonline.org

While I was aware that religion is a highly sensitive topic in the region, my decision to include it stemmed from the fact that I was looking at identity as a main component of my PhD. Religious sect is often an important aspect of daily life in the region as institutions and politicians use it to mobilise people. If participants did not want to state it, or didn't feel it was relevant to their identity, they had the options 'other', 'I don't know' or 'prefer not to say' in both the English and Arabic versions of the questionnaire.

The next question asked bloggers to write down their professions. I preferred to leave it as an empty box rather than attempt to categorise the professional fields in Lebanon and Syria, which are not only largely diverse but also labelled differently. The responses from Lebanon and Syria are in Appendix H. They range from students, doctors, designers, technical consultants to writers and journalists. There were no overarching patterns or major differences between blogging and profession in both countries.

5.2 The Blog

In Lebanon, all respondents, except for two, began their blog before 2006 (N=29). In Syria, the majority began after 2006 and only eight (N=37) bloggers began to blog before that date. The increase in the adoption of blogging in each country at different times was a theme raised in the interviews with bloggers. They described the different phases that blogging has undergone and the new entrants to the blogosphere in their respective countries. The changes in blogging activities and effects of new entrants to the blogging field are discussed in Chapters 5 and 6 and 7.

Table 7 – Year of starting blog

Year of blog	Lebanon Frequency	Lebanon Percent	Syria Frequency	Syria Percent
2000	3	10.3	0	0
2001	0	0	1	2.7
2002	1	3.4	0	0
2003	1	3.4	0	0
2004	7	24.1	3	8.2
2005	5	17.2	4	10.8
2006	10	34.5	13	35.1
2007	0	0	6	16.2
2008	2	6.9	10	27.0
Total (N)	29	100.0	37	100.0

English was the most dominant language used on blogs in Lebanon (12 of N =29). As for Arabic, only four respondents (N=29) stated they blog in it. The second trend showed that the use of a combination of Arabic and English (5) and English /French (5) was prevalent in Lebanon. The rest of the respondents wrote in a combination of English, Arabic and French or French alone in Lebanon.

Table 8 – Language blogged in (Lebanese origin)

Language (Lebanon)	Frequency	Percent
Colloquial Arabic	4	13.8
English	12	41.4
French	1	3.4
Arabic / English	5	17.2
English / French	5	17.2
Arab / Eng / French	1	3.4
Standard Arabic / Eng / French	1	3.4
Total	29	100.0

In Syria, no respondents said they blogged in French and the majority, 22 (N=37) in total, blogged in Arabic. Most Arabic writers (n=13), stated that they blogged in classic/standard Arabic[145]. The second most common form used was a combination of standard and spoken Arabic (9 of 37). This finding in Syria differs significantly with respect to language from that in 2005. The survey sent out at the time (N=91) to

[145]Standard/Classical Arabic is the formal written version of Arabic. It is the common language in the Arab world. Spoken (or colloquial) Arabic is the local dialect that often has influences from other languages. In Lebanon and Syria, the dialects are very similar to each other and have roots in Aramaic.

Lebanese, Syrian and Jordanian origin, had only four bloggers who said they blogged in Arabic.

Table 9 – Language blogged in (Syrian origin)

Language (Lebanon)	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Colloquial Arabic	13	35.1	35.1
English	5	13.5	13.5
Colloquial & Standard Arabic	9	24.3	24.3
Arabic / English	6	16.2	16.2
Colloquial Arabic / English	4	10.8	10.8
Total	37	100.0	100.0

Respondents who did not blog in Arabic were further asked to state their reason for blogging in another language. There were six options to choose from and they could tick as many as applied to them or write in the 'other' section an alternative reason. The majority of respondents who blog in a language other than Arabic said they do so because "It is the language I feel most comfortable writing in" in both Syria and Lebanon. This is partly due to the number of those who blog having studied abroad for one on their two highest degrees. In Lebanon, private schools focus on foreign languages (English and French) more than Arabic. This is discussed in Chapter 6. The third and fourth highest options picked in Lebanon as a reason for blogging in another language were: 'I want my blog to have international viewership' or because 'it is the international language of today'.

Table 10 – Please state reason why you blog in a language other than Arabic

Option	Frequency
It is the language I feel most comfortable writing in	
Lebanon	18
Syria	8
I want my blog to have international viewership	
Lebanon	7
Syria	1
It is the international language of today	
Lebanon	8
Syria	1
Most available sources are in that language	

Lebanon	2
Syria	1
It is easier and more accessible than Arabic	
Lebanon	4
Syria	1

In the 'other' section, some further clarified why they blog in a combination of languages. A respondent from Lebanon said he doesn't give it too much thought. He wrote: 'it depends on the mood. Sometimes it's easier to express some things in English'. Others commented that the language they chose to use for different posts was more strategic and depended on the content of the post and whom they were trying to reach. One commentator wrote: 'I use English in my technical posts and when talking about international causes (when the target isn't just the Arab world)'. Another blogger commented:

> I choose the language according to the topic, for example, I wouldn't write my critique on Hezbollah in English, 'cause there is a heavy material on them in English, but if it's something positive, I would go ahead in English.

In Syria, one respondent commented that he/she felt it was an obligation to blog in standard Arabic because it is the common language between Arabs. She said 'I feel ashamed if I don't write in Arabic. We Arabs will be very far from each other if we are [take it] too easy on using the classic Arabic language'. Chapter 6 discusses the meanings associated with using different languages in Lebanon and Syria.

3. Motivation

Bloggers were asked what motivated them to start a blog. A ranking system was deployed for the different categories of motivations[146]. Respondents could rank the themes from one being the most important and five the least. There were eleven themes in total and an 'other' option which they could rank as well. The table below shows the total number of respondents who picked each option and the average rank they gave that option.

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[146] The motivation categories constructed in the questionnaire were based on the interviews carried out with bloggers in the first fieldwork session (See Chapter 3).

The most *frequently* picked motivation category in both Lebanon and Syria was "to get others to read my thoughts and ideas". The respondents who picked this option as one of their five gave it an average rank of 2.5 in Lebanon and 2.8 in Syria. Almost half of respondents (n= 14), in Lebanon chose the option "to express myself about a specific event" as a motivation for blogging. The 2006 war and the 2005 Cedar Revolution were the two events they specified in the comment box. In Syria the second most chosen option was "To make changes in society for social development" followed by "To organize thoughts and record ideas". They both had an average rank of 2.6. In Lebanon, these two motivations were not the most popular. The second most popular motivation picked by respondents in Lebanon reveals that blogs are being used for instrumental purposes with 13 respondents stating they use it to: "develop my skills (writing / art/ design/ photography/ other..)". The skills they put in the comment box were "web design", "technical", "photography" and "showcasing work".

Table 11 – What motivated you to start a blog?

Motivations for blogging	Origin	Frequency	Average Rank
To get others to read my ideas and opinions	Lebanon (N=29)	18	2.5
	Syria (N=37)	22	2.81
	Total	40	
To interact with others	Lebanon (N=29)	13	3.1
	Syria (N=37)	16	2.68
	Total	29	
To feel part of a community	Lebanon (N=29)	6	3.1
	Syria (N=37)	15	2.9
	Total	21	
To make changes in society for social development	Lebanon (N=29)	10	2.8
	Syria (N=37)	20	2.65
	Total	30	
To develop my skills (writing / art / design / photography / other...)	Lebanon (N=29)	13	2.9
	Syria (N=37)	15	3

	Total	28	
To organize thoughts and record ideas	Lebanon (N=29)	11	2.27
	Syria (N=37)	23	2.69
	Total	34	
To offer a counter opinion or an original view	Lebanon (N=29)	9	2.7
	Syria (N=37)	15	3.5
	Total	24	
To show own perspective on some issues	Lebanon (N=29)	13	2
	Syria (N=37)	13	2.4
	Total	26	
To write about topics that are somewhat ignored	Lebanon (N=29)	6	3
	Syria (N=37)	14	2.8
	Total	20	
To express myself about a specific social or political event (please rank and specify event in text box)	Lebanon (N=29)	14	3.21
	Syria (N=37)	10	3
	Total	24	
Other (please rank and specify in text box)	Lebanon (N=29)	2	1
	Syria (N=37)	1	1
	Total	3	

A ranking system was also implemented for the topics blogged about, with one being the most important and five the least. "Activities, private thoughts and reflections" was the most picked category and had the highest mean rank in both Lebanon and Syria. In Lebanon "Poetry, literature and art" came second, which is consistent with the second highest most picked motivation "to develop my skills in (writing, art, design, photography etc). In Syria, the "local current affairs" category was picked by 20 respondents (N=37) and third most picked option was "human rights and development".

Table 12 – What topics do you blog about

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Topic blogged about	Origin	Total No. of respondents	Average rank
International political issues	Lebanon	6	4.16
	Syria	17	3.4
	Total	23	
Activities, private thoughts and reflections	Lebanon	20	2.25
	Syria	22	1.27
	Total	42	
Poetry, literature and art	Lebanon	17	2.6
	Syria	14	2.5
	Total	31	
Religious and spiritual matters	Lebanon	7	3.7
	Syria	6	2
	Total	13	
Human rights issues or development	Lebanon	7	3.13
	Syria	19	2.8
	Total	26	
Local current affairs	Lebanon	9	2.88
	Syria	20	3.05
	Total	29	
International current affairs	Lebanon	8	2.87
	Syria	17	3.4
	Total	25	
Political issues in country of origin	Lebanon	9	3.66
	Syria	3	3.66
	Total	12	
Social issues in country of origin	Lebanon	14	2.07
	Syria	16	2.31
	Total	30	

Two respondents from Lebanon elaborated on the main topic of their blogs in the "other" section,. They put "Music & Science" and "Feelings and personal stuff". In Syria, one respondent wrote "Technical stuff".

4. Anonymity

The first question asked whether the respondents were anonymous on their blog. I explained anonymity in the questionnaire as 'using a made-up name'. In Lebanon, a little under half of all bloggers stated that they were anonymous online while in Syria the majority 24 (N=37) were not anonymous. Three people in Syria however, had

one anonymous blog and another with their name on it.

Anonymity	Syria Frequency	Syria Percent	Lebanon Frequency	Lebanon Percent
No / Yes	3	8.1	2	6.9
No	24	64.9	15	51.7
Yes	9	24.3	12	41.4
Total	36	97.3	29	100
Missing	1	2.7	0	0
Total	37	100.0	29	100.0

Additionally participants were asked to state the reason why they chose to be anonymous by picking an option from the themes provided or leaving their own comment in the blank space. Only two people from Lebanon and Syria stated that it is because of "government repression". In the blank space provided however, two respondents from Lebanon commented that they were anonymous because of fear of repression but it did not come from governments but other political forces. Indeed, 2008 was a period in Lebanon of internal conflict between two opposing camps – the government-led March 14 forces and the Hezbollah-led March 8 forces. This theme had not come up in my interviews in the first fieldwork session. However I interviewed one of the respondents who wrote the comment here (LB11) during my second fieldwork trip.

The second most picked options in Lebanon and Syria were "I don't want my immediate surroundings to know about my blog" and "I feel more free if people don't know who I am (because...)". Two of the comments received in the blank space regarding this in Lebanon were "no pre judgments and no post judgement" and another said 'I don't want to mix personal and professional lives'. In Syria one respondent commented 'for security reasons". The use of anonymity and its meaning to Lebanese and Syrian bloggers is discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

Table 14 – Why are you anonymous?

Option	Lebanon	Syria
I don't feel safe because I'm afraid of repression from government	2	2
I don't want my immediate surroundings to know about my blog	5	4
I do not want to be judged for the content of my blog	2	2
I do not want to be categorized	4	4
I feel more free if people don't know who I am (because....)	5	6
I haven't given it much thought / because I can be	4	1

Those who were anonymous were asked to clarify to whom they revealed their identity. The majority in Lebanon and Syria said, "Other bloggers I interact with and trust". In Lebanon the option "those close to me in my personal life" was the second most picked option (n=11). However, in Syria, only one anonymous blogger picked that option. In the "other" section, one blogger from Lebanon put 'am quite open when asked about it, especially as extracts were published twice, making it hard to remain fully anonymous, but I seldom put it straight forward'. One blogger from Syria wrote, 'anyone I trust that is interested in general affairs'.

Table 15 – Who do you reveal your identity to?

Reveal anonymous identity	Response count Lebanon	Response count Syria
No one	0	1
Those close to me in my personal life	11	1
Other bloggers I interact with and trust	8	7
Other	6	6

The next question targeted those who were not anonymous and asked them to elaborate on why they reveal their identity online. In Syria, almost all bloggers (n=21) who were not anonymous said it was because it gave the blog more credibility. Fourteen bloggers from Syria also picked the options "I want to receive recognition for my blog" and "I don't think what I'm writing will get me in trouble". Comments generated from those in Syria who were not anonymous focused on

bloggings' credibility. They included the comments "Trust" and "because revolution ideas does not (sic) have hidden paths".

Table 16 – What drives you to reveal your identity?

Option	Response count Lebanon	Response count Syria
It gives more credibility to my blog	2	21
I want to receive recognition for my blog	5	14
I don't think what I'm writing will get me in trouble	2	14
I don't think anonymity online provides grants me the privacy I want	4	3
I haven't given it much thought/because I can be	5	7
Other	4	

In Lebanon, the association of real names with credibility was not that apparent, with only two people picking it as one of the reasons for why they reveal their real name. The two most chosen options were "I want to receive recognition for my blog" and "I haven't given it much thought/because I can be".

5. Interaction

The next question focused on bloggers and their interactions with other. The questionnaire asked, "Who are the other bloggers you interact with online? (through comments, links, face to face, chat)". In Lebanon and Syria, the highest picked option was "Other blogs you met online because of a shared interest". The second most picked option in both Lebanon and Syria was "Friends and acquaintances you know from outside of blogging". No one said they do not interact with bloggers at all. In the blank space, comments written included: "I link to blogs that I think others may find helpful or interesting." And "I link to blogs and website that give more context to my posts".

Table 17 – Who are the other bloggers you interact with online?

Option	Response count Lebanon	Response count Syria
Friends and acquaintances you know from outside of blogging	16	12
Other blogs you met online because of a shared interest	23	31
Bloggers you met because of offline meetings that took place	4	7
I don't usually interact with bloggers	0	0
Other	5	2

Respondents were then asked if they met other bloggers face to face. In Lebanon only seven of the sample had not met anyone face to face through blogging. In Syria 13 respondents (N=37) said that they didn't meet anyone through blogging. The remaining respondents in both countries had face to face contact with people they met online. The numbers of those they met did not differ significantly

Table 18 – How many people have you met with face to face through blogging?

Face to face meetings	Syria Frequency	Syria Percent	Lebanon Frequency	Lebanon Percent
None	13	35.1	7	24.1
1-3	7	18.9	4	13.8
4-7	6	16.2	7	24.1
8-11	2	5.4	3	10.3
12 or more	4	10.8	7	24.1
Total	32	86.5	28	96.6
Missing	5	13.5	1	3.4
Total	37	100.0	2.9	100

Social networking sites (SNS) were the next subject of inquiry. Respondents were first asked whether they used any social networking site other than blogs. In Lebanon, 26 respondents (N=29) used various other social networking sites. In Syria, these sites were also popular, with 24 respondents (N=37) stating that they used them. Respondents were also asked to specify which social networking sites they used. In Lebanon and Syria together, the majority were on Facebook (n=30). MySpace had the second highest users with six respondents from Lebanon. Other

social networking sites mentioned, but by no more than two respondents each, were NetBlog, Twitter, linkedIn and SmallWorld. Twitter in 2008 at the time of sending out the questionnaire was still extremely novel and subsequent interviews with bloggers suggest that more bloggers are now using it.

Table 19 – Do you use other social networking sites such as Facebook, myspace, Bebo?

SNS	Lebanon Frequency	Lebanon Percent	Syria Frequency	Syria Percent
Yes	26	89.7	24	64.9
No	2	6.9	9	24.3
Total	28	96.6	33	89.2
Missing	1	3.4	4	10.8
Total	29	100.0	37	100

The next question asked if they linked their blog to any of the social networking sites they were on (explicitly making references to it or publicizing it on the blog). More Syrians on other social networking sites linked their blogs to it with 20 out of the 24 stating that they did so. In Lebanon, however, out of the respondents who said they used other social networking sites (N=26), less than half (n=12), said they linked their blog to other social networking sites.

Table 20 – Do you link your blog to any of these sites (explicitly making references to it
or publicizing it) on the blog?

Link blog to SNS	Lebanon Frequency	Lebanon Percent	Syria Frequency	Syria Percent
No	14	48.3	7	18.9
Yes	12	41.4	20	54.1
Total	26	89.7	27	73.0
Missing	3	10.3	10	27
Total	29	100.0	37	100

The next question asked bloggers who their target audience is. Almost all the options were picked equally in Lebanon. The option "people from all over the world" was picked by slightly more respondents than other options.

Table 21 – Who do you target on your blog?

Target Audience	Response count Lebanon	Response count Syria
Friends and acquaintances	11	8
People from own country	11	13
People from Middle East or Arab world	13	20
People from all over the world	14	10
I don't have a target audience in mind	9	5
Other	9	8

In Syria, twice as many respondents targeted "people from Middle East or Arab world" than "people from all over the world". These differences in target could be due to differences in language blogged in. As shown in language tables 5.8 and 5.9, those in Syria blogged in Arabic much more than those in Lebanon. Indeed, two people from Syria wrote in the comments section that their target was anyone who spoke Arabic. One blogger from Lebanon said he targets people from all over the world but particularly Lebanese living abroad. How bloggers conceive of their audience is discussed in Chapter 7.

Bloggers were then asked how long they think they will keep blogging for. The majority of bloggers in Lebanon and Syria picked the two options "I have no intention of stopping" and "as long as I have the time for it". One commentator from Lebanon said, 'until I find a reason to stop, as I waited for a reason to start in the first place (the Israeli war in 2006)'.

Table 22 – How long do you think you will keep blogging?

Stop blogging	Lebanon	Syria
I have no intention of stopping	10	12
As long as I have the time for it	8	14
When I finish my literary / political / art project that I blog on	1	0
As long as others are blogging and there is a community of people blogging	1	3
I don't blog anymore	5	1
Total	28	30
Missing	1	8
Total	29	37

As shown in table above, six of the respondents to the survey had already stopped their blogging activities. Those who picked that option were further asked to state why they do not blog anymore, in a comment box. A few respondents said they stopped because of time constraints: 'I stopped for a couple of months, i had too much on my plate but I intend to start again'. Two respondents said they stopped because other social networking sites took over their blogging activities, 'Facebook killed the blogger. And I got bored of it. No-one visits it anymore'. Another from Lebanon commented:

> Facebook and other means offered a more focused approach to a more targeted audience, and the readership of blogs had already dropped so much that it didn't include many beyond the people who were meeting offline.

Furthermore, a respondent from Lebanon who stopped said he/she stopped because of disappointment with blogging. The comment left was: 'no time, no results, and no real revolution ideas. It is basically boring agendas. It was a phase and is long gone!'

6. Opinions & Comments

The last section of the questionnaire asked bloggers to give their stance on a number of statements related to blogging. The first asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement "I feel more free online and tend to say things I wouldn't say offline". In both Lebanon and Syria, the numbers of those who agreed and disagreed with the statement were almost equal.

Table 23 – I feel more free online and tend to say things I wouldn't say offline

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Lebanon	6	10	8	4
Syria	3	14	11	5

The second statement they were asked to rank was "I have been exposed to opportunities (related to personal or career development, media exposure, audience

exposure) that could not have happened if I didn't blog". This statement had more responses in agreement with it in both Lebanon and Syria than not. Syrians tended to agree with it more than the Lebanese.

Table 24 – I have been exposed to opportunities that could not have happened if I didn't blog.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Lebanon	8	9	8	2
Syria	9	20	2	2

The third statement "my online life and interactions are separate and distinct to my offline life" had more respondents who disagreed with it. In Lebanon 18 people tended to disagree while 10 agreed with the statement. In Syria, 24 people disagreed with it while nine agreed.

Table 25 – My online life and interactions are separate and distinct to my offline life.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Lebanon	3	7	13	5
Syria	2	7	18	6

The last statement was "I have interacted with people from blogging that I would never have been exposed to in my offline life". In Lebanon the vast majority (n=21) agreed with the statement versus seven who did not. Similarly in Syria 30 respondents agreed with it while only three disagreed.

Table 26 – I have interacted with people from blogging that I would never have been exposed to in my offline life.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Lebanon	10	11	7	0
Syria	14	16	2	1

At the end of the questionnaire, a blank space was left open for anyone to comment on an aspect of blogging that they deemed important but not covered in the questionnaire. One blogger pointed out, 'I would like to say that I began blogging because I have a speech impediment and it made people underestimate my potential. I found in blogs a way to connect in a wider geographic way'. Another comment received 'blogs in Syria are a *motafakak* [fragmented], they do not cooperate and are not united in contrast to Egyptian blog that are united and that were able to meet, strike and bring results'.

Appendix H – Respondents' professions

Administrator (3)
Admin in a government org
Arabic teacher
Art Director
Caregiver
Chemical engineer
Comics author, musician
Comparative literature
Computer engineer
Consultant
Customer service
Designer/illustrator/author
Doctor
Engineer
Fashion designer
Graphic Designer in Baladna News Paper
Historian
Illustrator
IT Consultant (2)
Ma3had Business Admin
Marketing
Marketing Manager
Merchandiser
Media
Pharmacist
Physician
Programmer and manager of software development
Project Manager in Environment & health policies
Project manager of web development
Public Relations
Rating in Microfinance
Registered Nurse/Instructor
Senior Designer
Software Developer
Social writer - Employee (IT dept.) - Community Service
Student (8)
Systems Engineer
Technical and commercial engineer
Trainer on conflict resolution
Translator
Unemployed (3)
Visual Artist
Web developer (2)
Writer (2)

Appendix I – War blog screenshots
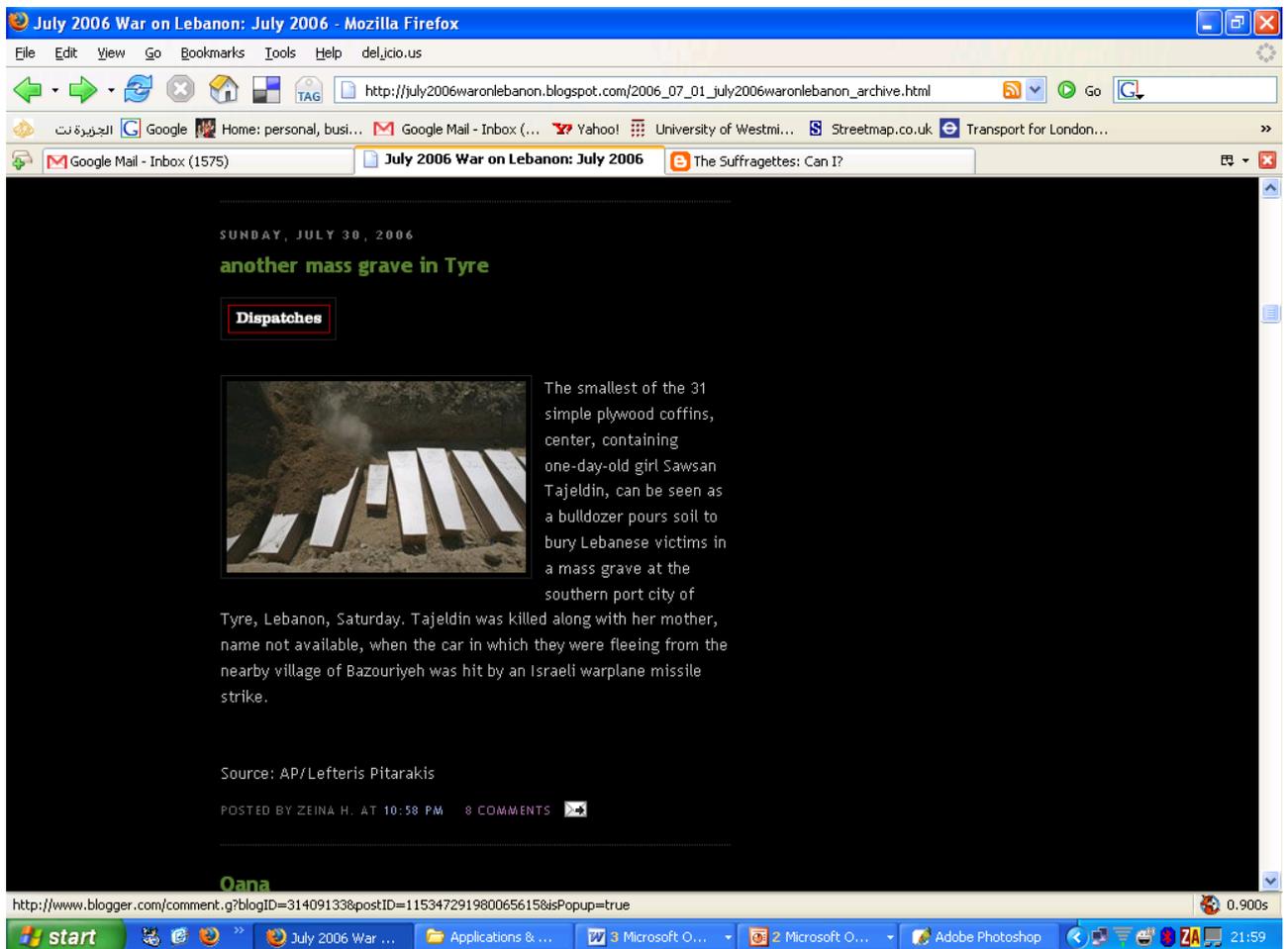
Comments posted in response to 'another mass grave in Tyre' from the above blog:

Anonymous said...
Just wondering how many more pro terriosts web sites there are in Lebanon like this one? I sure find this crap funny. Until you people are willing to live in peace with Israel then stop whining about getting the ass-kicking you deserve!
July 29, 2006 9:45 PM

Soraya said...
there are many many of them... i am sure you have noticed. and since you find "this crap funny", keep on coming back and enjoy it. it seems we are making you scared by showing the world your atrocities. and obviously your comments on our blogs just confirm how scared you are.
July 30, 2006 12:20 AM

Anonymous said...

Sweetheart, if the U.S wanted to really fight and not give a crap about civilans, the hole middle east would be defeated in a matter of weeks ……..Remember our freedom was not free and nor will yours be free when you confront hezbollah after Israel leaves!
July 30, 2006 1:52 AM

Alya said...
How can someone be proud of his killing capacities? your state just killed 22 children in Qana, now. A total of 55 people in one shot. they were hiding in a shelter. I hope you will never get peace.
July 30, 2006 9:38 AM

Raj said...
Hey anonynous Zionoid coward, shoo! get sway from this forum. We know you have been activated by the IDF for precisely this sort of garbage delivery that you are so sincerely engaged in. Terrorism with a capital T is being raised to new heights by the Israeli war machine.
July 31, 2006 10:42 AM

Appendix J – Internet café questionnaire

Internet café questionnaire - Users & Owners

Interviewer's Name:

Date of Interview:

Café location:

Area, region and any key locations nearby such as universities…

Café description:

Number of computers, clientele, and services offered. Write a description of café and activities.

Café user questions:

1. Sex

Female
Male

2. Age group

Under 15
16-22
23-29
30- 39
40-49
50 or over

3. Occupation

4. Highest education level

5. Years of Internet use

6. Where did you acquire your knowledge in using computer technology and the Internet?
Self-Instruction
Friends
Family
School
Other

7. Where did you first use the Internet?
Internet Café
Work/office
Home
School/university
Other…

8. How often do you come to Internet cafes?

9. Do you have Internet access at home / school / work?

10. What kind of Internet connection do you have at home? Do you know the speed? How much do you pay for it?
Dial-up (monthly, scratch cards etc)
Broadband
Other options…

11. Why do you come to the Internet café?
I do not have access anywhere else
It is faster than at home
I can access more sites here than at home/work because (…)
I have more privacy here
To socialise with friends
Other….

12. How many hours a week do you spend online?

13. Describe your online activities? What do you do online?

Maybe rank 1-5 in terms of frequency of use?
Read/Send Email
Purposeful research of Information
Use social networking sites such as Facebook, Myspace, twitter
Participating in chat rooms/forums/blogging
Playing networked games
Watching videos on youtube and/or other video hosting websites
Chatting to friends
Calling relatives/friends abroad.
Other….

14. Do you frequently watch videos online?
Yes
No
If yes:

What do you watch and how often?

If no, why?
Because the connection is very slow

I'm not interested
There is not enough Arabic content out there
Other….

15. Do you consider yourself a passive or active Internet user? Do you contribute to discussion boards, frequently comment on websites or write in a blog?

16. What is the greatest barrier in using the Internet?

Language
Money
Speed
Wasting time
Family restrictions
Other…

17. What is the greatest advantage of the Internet for you?

18. Are there any other comments you would like to add about your Internet use?

Café owner questions:

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1. Who comes to your café?
Have them describe in their own words but make sure they cover demographic details too.

2. How is your cafe connected to the Internet? And what is the speed?

3. How much do you charge clients/hour?

4. How long, on average, do clients usually stay in your Internet cafe?

5. What other services do you offer?
Printing, coffee, bar etc

6. What do your clients do on the Internet?
Allow them to describe this but make sure they cover different kinds of people and different activities below.

Read/Send Email
Purposeful research of Information
Use social networking sites such as Facebook, Myspace, twitter
Participating in chat rooms/forums/blogging
Playing networked games
Watching videos on you-tube and other sites
Chatting to friends
Calling relatives/friends abroad
Other….

7. Why do you think people come to Internet cafés?

Most customers do not have Internet access at home
The speed in the café is faster than their home connections.
More privacy (away from the family, siblings, co-workers)
To socialise with friends
Other….

8. Are there any sites that are banned in your Internet cafes?

9. Do you monitor your client's activities? What do you watch out for?

10. Would you like to add anything about Internet use in your cafes?

Appendix K – Al Mudawen discussion

Summary of a discussion with Syrian bloggers on Al Mudawen.net [147]

In collaboration with Al Mudawen.net[148] the Syrian blog portal and aggregator, a discussion amongst Syrian bloggers was initiated on July 22, 2009 in the forum section[149] of the website. A brief of the main objectives of the project were provided along with the following questions as points of discussion:

1. Is there an appetite for skills development in the Syrian blogging community on basic journalistic/editorial/writing skills, Web 2.0 tools (Social media training, photo-sharing, video-sharing, mobile phones, social networking)?
2. Are there any specific issues/subjects/skills that are especially missing? What do you think are subjects that need to be stressed on?
3. Would an online magazine be an attractive outlet for the blogosphere's work?
4. What are the biggest obstacles facing the Syrian blogosphere as an alternative medium for self-expression?

All the commentators revealed keenness and enthusiasm towards general skills development training in the Syrian blogging community. Many stressed the need for bloggers to learn more about 'the culture of blogging'. Ans[150] for example noted, 'because the Syrian blogosphere is relatively new and we do not have access to other blogospheres (because of the banning of main blog hosting sites[151]) we lack any kind of experience to fall back on'. Another blogger, Hosam Akras[152] said, 'the experiences of other bloggers in the region would be good for the Syrian blogosphere'. Min Zaman[153] also noted, 'we need to develop the cultural knowledge of what blogging is amongst bloggers […] and introduce to them the different ways in which one can blog and some of its pitfalls…' He continued, 'we also lack skills in reading and writing in the wider sense including summarising, quoting, creating a discussion etc etc. ethical writing, blogging and media protocols, good communication, debating skills'. Another blogger, Ataalah[154] said, 'first and foremost [we need] writing skills, organising a blog, making ideas/points clear'. Yaser[155], another commentator saw a great need for developing training that taught the basics of managing a blogging platform and debating with audiences. He also said the blogosphere needs help in learning how to promote their blogs and get messages across to a wider audience. Many Syrian bloggers share the idea that blogging should not to be used for entertainment or as a hobby but to lobby for change and serve as an extension of their existing mainstream media platforms that are censored

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[147] Bloggers comments were translated from Arabic.
[148] http://www.almudawen.net/
[149] http://blog.almudawen.net/
[150] http://anasalali.com/
[151] The majority of Arab bloggers host their blogs on Blogspot.com or Maktoob.com that are both banned in Syria. Syrians generally use Wordpress.com or their own bespoke sites to host their blogging on.
[152] http://hosamakras.com/
[153] http://mnzaman.wordpress.com/
[154] http://www.ataalah.com/
[155] http://roneceve.wordpress.com/

In general, the skills that the commentators stressed that the blogosphere lack were:

- Writing skills/editorial skills/debating skills
- Running/administering a blog /engaging with the audience
- Turning information/events into comprehensive texts, audio or visual material while taking advantage of Web 2.0 tools
- Promoting blogs, reaching a broader audience

There were mixed reactions towards question three on the idea of having an online magazine to showcase the blogospheres work. Some bloggers argued that their blogs already provided such a medium and were not sure if another platform would be successful. Others on the other hand, wrote that they could envision it as a good space that would potentially foster a healthy spirit of competition in the blogosphere. Ataalah warned of the heavy divisions in the Syrian blogosphere, which could be forwarded onto the magazine. He said 'for an online magazine to work, its administration must be far away from the sensitivities in the blogosphere, the pressures of contacts and nepotism that goes on'. Others commented that instead of having another 'online' presence - that may only reach the same online audience - there needs to be some efforts to move content offline. Some suggested printing the magazine while others thought that already existing media platforms could serve as a good alternative to showcase work on, such as that of BBC Arabic.

Concerning the main impediments to blogging, most of them cited 'security' as the main obstacle to their blogging activities. They stressed that the 'red lines' as to what is acceptable are vague which inclines them to be anonymous (and thus less credible according to some) or to avoid sensitive topics altogether. Others found that the main impediment to their blogging activity is the speed of the Internet and the lack of infrastructure investment on behalf of the government.

Appendix L – List of images taken during fieldwork

Image 1 – 24 hour Internet café in Damascus
Image 2 – Portrait of Bashar Al Asad on café window in Damascus
Image 3 – Street graffiti in Beirut
Image 4 – Internet user in café in Beirut
Image 5 – advertising posters for wireless Internet in Beirut
Image 6 – Internet café user interior in Beirut
Image 7 – Internet café in Damascus alley
Image 8 – Internet café sign in busy street in Damascus
Image 9 - Quiet street in Damascus

Internet Caffee

inks
internet caffee
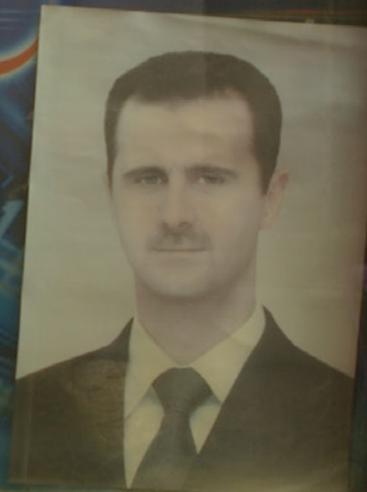
Next door please

Billiard & Darts

Net cafe

Wireless Internet

Free Internet
For 1 Month
03 / 85 19 85

- Huda Sch.

Internet

Free Internet
For 1 Month
DSL
70/677232

- €,1 232

أن تعلن عن التسجيل

لعام الدراسي ٢٠٠٧-٢٠٠٨