

Referee's report

Referee's name : Amr Gharbeia

Manuscript title : Blogging the Body

The subject of study has not been previously covered to the needed depth, although having caused a measurable change in the public opinion, especially in the two cases the paper tackles. The paper, therefore, is needed, and I generally recommend publishing it after a review taking the points below in consideration. In itself it would make an addition to the body of knowledge about new media in Egypt, as well as create interest for more thorough and wider studies, perhaps with quantitative analysis. Once completed, it would be an addition to recommend to interested readers.

Referee's comments

[This space is for comments to the editors which will not be sent to the author]

I would encourage the author to broaden the scope to blogging on social issues, as I think its influence on youth ideas is not less than the effect of exposing torture on the public opinion, if it reaches the same popularity the torture and sexual harassment got. Data for study is obviously collected from the blogs, and there is no evidence of attempting original interviews.

Referee's comments

[These comments will be photocopied and sent to the author]

The paper's main thesis, blogs challenging state's discourse in mainstram media, is valid and clearly presented. The information presented to support the thesis, however, can be improved in terms of scope and newness.

Sources: The author relies on the outdated Egyptian Blog Ring for an estimation of the number of blogs in the Egyptian blogosphere. The Ring has been inactive since its creator, Mindbleed, has stopped maintaining his own blog. A very important piece of information while comparing the Egyptian blogs to other Arab blogospheres, for example, is its rapid growth, doubling every six months at times. Blogs coming out of Egypt are now too many to keep track of, especially after the Egyptian Blogs Aggregator (<http://omraneya.net>) stopped its initial persistence on including all the blogs coming out of Egypt, now abandoned for reasons related entirely to resources. My conservative estimation for blogs coming out of Egypt is a dozen thousand. Sources should be indicated by pemalinks of certain posts, not blogs URLs.

Bloggers' profile and audience: Milad Yacoub, A blogger trained in the statistical method and a PhD student conducted a study in late 2004/Early 2005 and concluded with a profile for the average blogger. The average blogger in 2005 was a 25 year-old, male middle class, professional, university graduate who spoke one other language in addition to his mother tongue. The author repeatedly presents bloggers as on the higher end of the social classes. The trend, however, is opposite to this. With the growing number of blogs, it is slowly becoming representative of much larger segments of the Egyptian society. Personally knowing all of the bloggers mentioned in the paper, I can surely claim that, while most are middle class, with a growing trend towards lower classes, and not in the other direction. Blogging is no longer a "privilege of a very limited number of Egyptians". The medium itself is less elitist than newspapers. While the largest weekly newspaper in Egypt has a circulation of 600,000 copies, the UN Human Development report estimated the number of internet users in Egypt between 6-8 million, a comparatively huge pool of potential blog-readers. Having said that, the importance of blogs has shown itself in the two cases mentioned in the paper as they kept pushing the stories until the mainstream media had to cover them, bringing them to a much wider audience, especially that of television and independent newspapers.

Scope: While considering "blogging the body", the author focused on the cases of sexual embarrassment and torture incidents, both reported by bloggers as first- or second-hand experiences, leaving behind far more rich accounts of young women writing about their bodies (some may argue that the ceiling for political criticism is higher in newspapers than it is in blogs. However, social and religious writings in the blogs are far more free in the blogs), their child abuse experiences, reflections on menstruation, attempts to recruit them as sex-workers, homosexuality (very accepted in some circles in comparison with the rest of society), all subjects getting very little or no reach to mainstream media. Although

it is very difficult to get a comprehensive picture of the blogosphere today, I imagine the profile of the average blogger changing to a 18-20 year-old university student. The average blogger is also a female. The author indicates focusing on a group of bloggers/activists. However, a larger and much less studied group of bloggers, especially females writing freely, goes usually unnoticed. This would more suit the author's argument that “[b]logging produces an unregulated narrative, which does not abide by the authoritarian norms outlined by the state, without directly confronting the state as do other traditional forms of political or social activism. I will examine Egyptian bloggers’ writings on the body as a gendered, embodied experience of resistance to the state.”

The author postulates that “Blogging the body in Egypt is a gendered exercise, where issues of sexual harassment, sexuality and modesty often focus on the female body, while torture, political activism and state brutality are frequently embodied in descriptions and images of the tortured male body.” This assumption, though valid, fails to indicate that it is usually the males who directly suffer torture, or at least this is how the Egyptian human rights organisations present it. The blogs reflect the information they receive.

While reviewing how the blogs provided “an alternative view to this masculinist assumption” regarding sexual harassment, the author failed to present a patriarchal discourse presented in other posts by other bloggers, or in comments of other bloggers/readers on the posts providing this alternative view.

Facts: Blogger Monem has been released from jail for a few months now. Sandmonkey is blogging again.