



# Look Homeward, Blogger

**JO's new media correspondent talks to Saudi Blogger Ahmed and Jordanian Haitham Sabbagh about the future of blogging, the Second Al Jazeera forum, and the explosion of junk on the internet.**

This February, the second Al Jazeera forum brought the Arab media into the only-a-little-proverbial crosshairs, as the relevance of the powerful and popular satellite channels Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya was weighed against the importance of growing more independent and aggressive local media.

Though much of the forum focused on the rivalry between Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, the even bloodier rivalry between both of them and the 400kg gorilla of the "western media," and the imminent rollout of Al Jazeera's international English-language channel, but new media also played a part, as bloggers and traditional journalists debated the impact of blogs, and what will become of them.

Populism is wonderful, but as the presence of blogging grows, are new structures and hierarchies going to have to evolve? Will blogging continue to be the "next big thing," or will it give way to something else?

Here, two blogger participants in the forum share something about their blogs, and their impressions.

Haitham Sabbah is a Jordanian, living in Bahrain, who started blogging years ago as a way of keeping track of technology news that interested him, but soon found it to be addictive.

HAITHAM: Late in 2003, I started to note the rise of the western political blogosphere... and was disappointed how Arab and Middle East is represented in this new media. I could not resist but to write my own post to represent the Arab world and Middle East from a citizen's perspective, which in fact is very different to that presented in the Western blogs.

Slowly I realized the power of the blog in general, and it became a sort of responsibility to keep my blog and write more about misrepresented issues and topics related to the Arabs and the Middle East. My aim was to educate and correct the wrong perception that the West is presenting intentionally and unintentionally.

On the other hand, I felt the responsibility to keep blogging to educate more Arabs and show them how important blogging is and what a powerful tool it has become in today's media.

While most of what I write is commentary, I don't miss [the chance] to blog news that never makes it into the West's MSM [mainstream media], or which is ignored and not given enough attention. I keep my aggregator running 24/7 and read posts from all around the world. I also keep my eyes on the street and some times pick taboo subjects that are not talked about in the

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news. I don't claim that I make news, but sometimes... I form a backup for many other bloggers.

Ahmed, a.k.a. Saudi Jeans: My name is Ahmed Al-Omran. I was born on May 30, 1984, in a big city called Hassa, east of Saudi Arabia. I received all of my primary education in public schools there, and when I graduated from high school in 2002 I moved to the capital, Riyadh, where I currently study pharmacy at King Saud University (KSU).

I started blogging in May 2002. I had a journal since I was 13, when writing was not (and still isn't) the hot thing to do among Saudi teenagers. But ever since, writing has been always my favorite way to give others the chance to see how I look at this world. When I discovered the internet I made a personal website, but it did not last long, because soon after that I discovered blogging, and thought it was the perfect medium for personal publishing, inspired by some Kuwaiti, Bahraini, and Jordanian blogs that had been around for some time.

The internet is widely available in Saudi Arabia, but considering the large population of the Kingdom, there is still a lot of work to do to embrace the internet in the lives of ordinary citizens. The internet is highly censored by the government, but blogs in general are accessible, however, I don't know if that was because the government is okay with blogging, or because they just don't realize what blogs are and they have not noticed them yet.

I get news from different sources: newspapers on the net, news websites, and blogs. I rarely read any newspaper in the printed form now, and I watch much less TV than I used to do before I started blogging. I also follow about 300 blogs on different topics from all around the world.

**JO:** There are so many blogs these days – particularly with Arab world blogs, and

the good ones are getting harder and harder to find. Agree or disagree? Does this mean blogging will lose its edge, or do you see natural selection going on in the blogosphere?

**Haitham:** I was asked [at the forum]: how can we hold a blogger credible to what he writes? He can fake news, etc. My answer was simple: time and the comments that the blogger receives will establish a certain level of credibility. We can't and should not hold a blogger credible for all that he says from day one. Slowly, what he writes will prove or fail the readers judgment, and will gain or lose credibility accordingly.

**Ahmed:** I agree that the Arab blogosphere has been growing really fast over the past two years, but I think it is a good thing. Because after all, the good content will stand out, and thanks to social networking apps (i.e. blogging, del.icio.us, Digg, etc...) it is not difficult now to find such content. Moreover, the Arab blogosphere has witnessed in the past few months some good attempts to filter the content of blogs in order to give you the best of it. Websites such as itoot.net and Dawwen are two good examples.

**JO:** Ahmed, the "superficial" problem seems to be pretty bad, compared to blogs from Iran or Syria or Palestine. Do you think this is true? Do you have an explanation for it?

**Ahmed:** It is true. For instance, I'm a member of Global Voices, and one of my duties is to write a weekly roundup post of what's hot in the Saudi blogosphere. It has become a major headache for me because I could not find much useful content to feature on a weekly basis, especially when all what's available is "I was in Faisliah and bought this great thing..."

I think one of the main reasons behind this is that Saudis, unlike Kuwaitis or Lebanese for example, are not used to talk in politics, or to discuss their problems aloud and publicly. Another reason is that blogging is still a new thing in Saudi Arabia, and most bloggers are teens or in their early twenties, and with the kind of comfortable life and welfare that most of them live in, it is not expected to see them have a genuine interest in politics or other issues related to their society and country.

I have some concerns [about security]. But what encourages me is that I think things are changing in Saudi Arabia, and with King Abdullah now

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in power, I'm optimistic about the future. One of the first things he did after he became a king was to free three "prisoners of opinion" from jail. We are moving for more freedom and openness, but there is a long way to go, and we need some time.

**JO:** Haitham, what do you think about security?

**Haitham:** Blogging can face threats just like any other way of publication. A journalist can be jailed anyway, he does not need to be a blogger to give his local authority a reason to detain him. However, blogging is now much more secure; anyone can blog using specific techniques which will make it impossible for anyone to trace him back or know who is behind a blog. There is already a guide that was published by Report-

ers Sans Frontieres, which helps those who fear blogging for security reasons.

**JO:** So, what stood out for you about the discussion of blogging at the Al Jazeera Forum?

**Ahmed:** First, I was surprised that a traditional media organization from the Arab World such as Al Jazeera was interested in blogging. However, I think it is good for them, because blogging (and other kinds of citizen journalism such as podcasting, vlogging, etc...) are changing the face of media in today's world.

**Haitham:** [One claim was] that blogging is a bubble that will burst sooner or later. All bloggers rejected that, and explained how and why blogging is here to stay. Blogging [has] developed from a personal journal to become one of the main sources for news to some MSM... many news media are having their own blogs, and [have] recruited bloggers.

**Ahmed:** One of the things that I found refreshing, is that the traditional media guys are starting to realize that blogs are not here to compete with them. Of course, traditional media felt the sense of competition and decided to improve their work, which is good,

**Haitham:** Besides, blogging is the only source of alternative news these days, and it is not going to vanish.

**Ahmed:** But the fact is that bloggers don't see themselves in the role of competitor. Bloggers are here to play a different role: sometimes to break the news faster, sometimes to go behind the stories and between the lines, and many times to focus on stories that are underreported.

**Haitham:** Why do we blog and how: This was a subject that I talked about. Arab bloggers in particular, blog to bridge a gap that the traditional media created; to bridge the culture and political understanding between West and East. Millions [in the West] are against the war and occupation, but our people hardly know that. So, Arab blogging is trying to bridge these gaps.

**JO:** So, the blog as an alternative media seems likely to survive, as long as there's a void to be filled. Perhaps a comforting thought. Now all we need is a few Westerners to start blogging in Arabic... **JO**